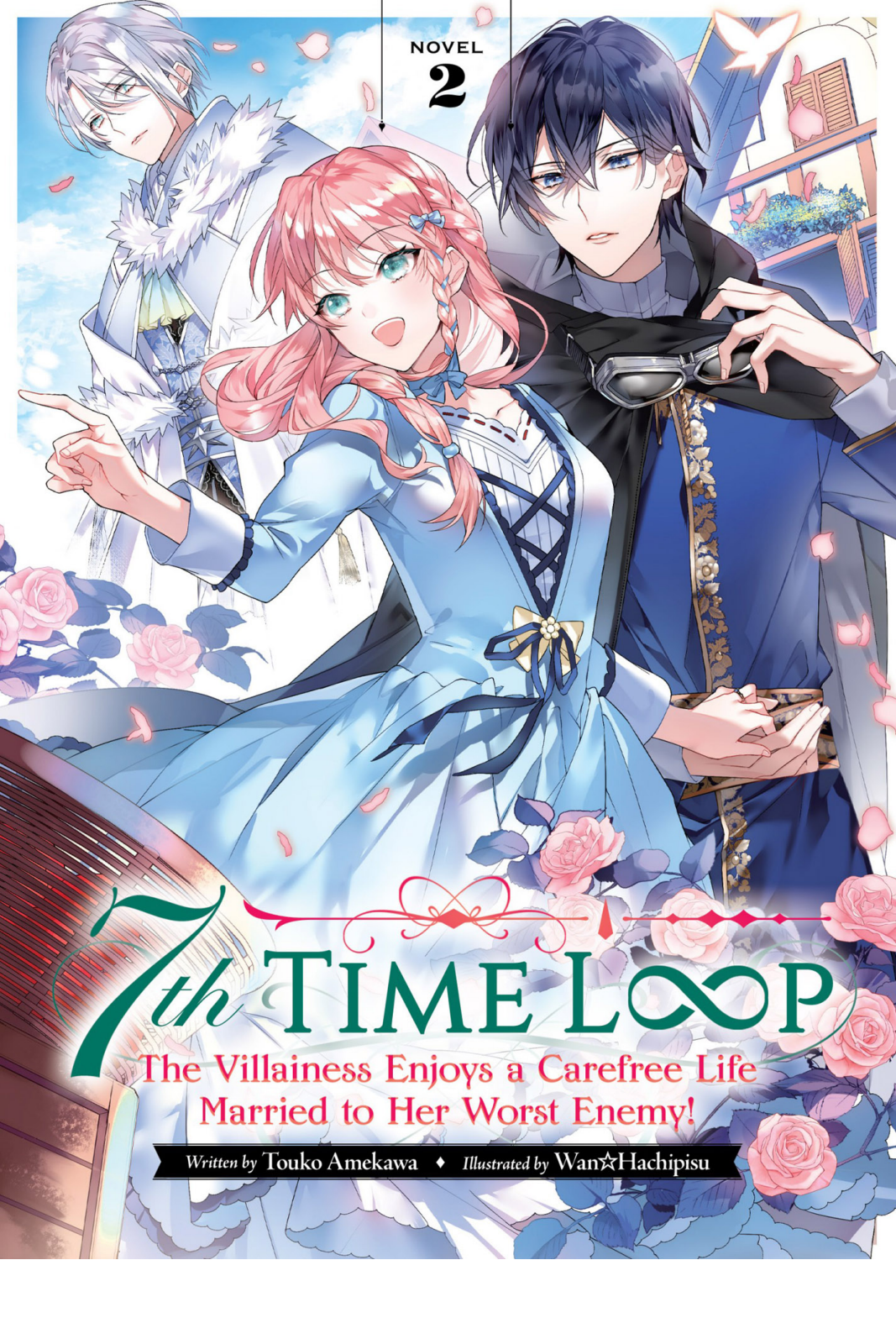




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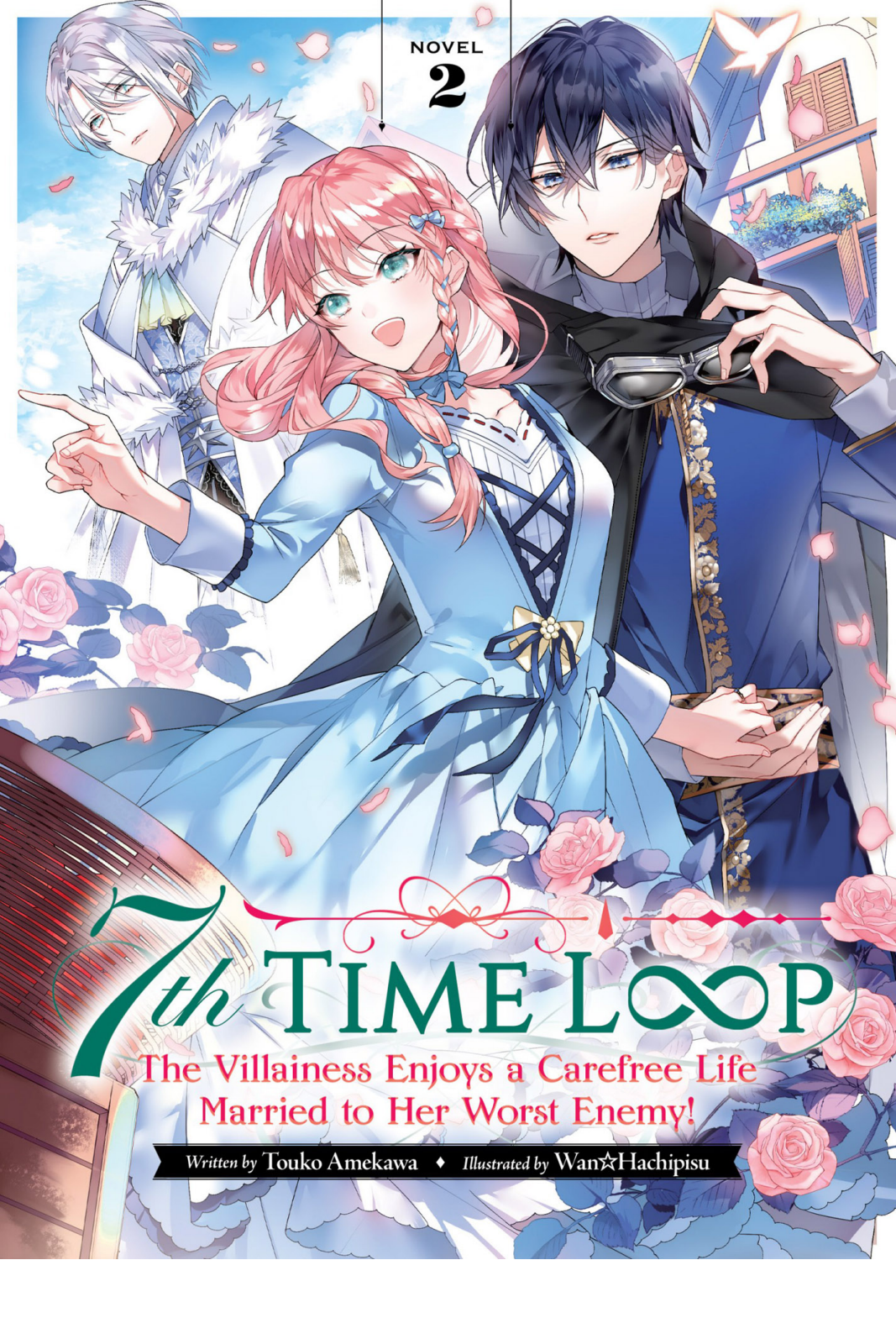
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7th TIME LOOP

The Villainess Enjoys a Carefree Life
Married to Her Worst Enemy!

Written by Touko Amekawa ♦ Illustrated by Wan☆Hachipisu





NOVEL

2

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"Wh-whaaa?!"

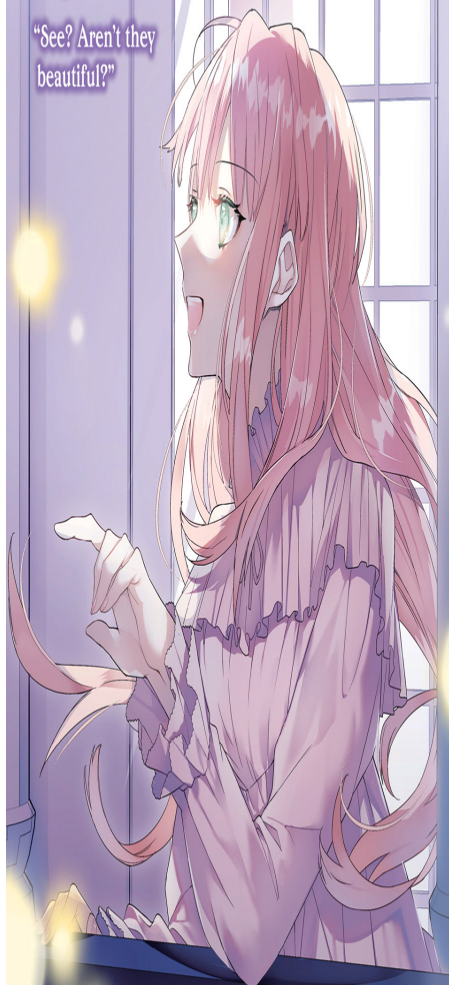
"Don't
struggle.
You'll fall."

Smiling at Arnold,
she pointed to the
fireflies drawing trails
of light in the air.

"See? Aren't they
beautiful?"

Arnold was silent
for a moment as
he looked at Rische,
and then he let
out a small breath.

"I suppose
you're right."





“ ”
...

*“Your bride
is beautiful
down to
her very
fingertips.”*

*“Thank you
very much.”*

**Kyle Morgan
Cleverly**

Crown prince of the
snowy country of
Coyolles. Suffering
from a chronic illness.



7th TIME LOOP

The Villainess Enjoys a Carefree Life
Married to Her Worst Enemy!

NOVEL

2

WRITTEN BY

Touko Amekawa

ILLUSTRATED BY

Wan☆Hachipisu



Seven Seas Entertainment

7TH TIME LOOP: THE VILLAINESS ENJOYS A CAREFREE LIFE
MARRIED TO HER WORST ENEMY! VOL. 2

Rūpu 7-kai-me no Akuyaku Reijō wa, Moto Tekikoku de Jiyū Kimamana
Hanayome Seikatsu o Mankitsu suru Vol. 2

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Fake Dating for Fleeting Amusement



Chapter 1

FOR A FEW DAYS after her kidnapping, Rishe recuperated in her nice, fluffy bed. She kept her gardening work to the bare minimum, left the maids' training to Diana, and ate plenty of nutritious food. While she *did* fill out order forms to merchants and continue her nail polish business plan from bed, she mostly just slept. A lot. With the help of a medicine she'd created herself, she fully recovered within five days.

After receiving a clean bill of health from the palace physician, she paid a visit to a certain room in the castle, feeling tense.

"Enter."

Steeling herself, Rishe stepped into her fiancé's office. "Good day, Your Highness. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to see me."

Arnold stopped writing and slowly set his pen down next to his papers. "This is the first time you've ever called a formal meeting."

Rishe was an utter ball of nerves. Her plan, which had been in the making for a long time, was entering its final stages. For the sake of the maids who had escorted her here—and for herself—she had to perform her duty.

Everything will be fine. I've done the best that I could.

Arnold returned her uneasy look with a composed smile. "What could this meeting be about, I wonder? You're far too anxious to have come solely to see your fiancé's face."

"You've seen right through me," Rishe said. "Let me get straight to the point, then." Arnold's attendant, Oliver, threw her a cautious look. She took a deep breath and, after letting the tension sufficiently build, declared, "Your rooms in the detached palace are ready!"

Arnold's brow furrowed. "What?"

Even twisted in a grimace, his face was handsome. Rishe couldn't help but notice as she explained, "You have an office on the second floor and a bedroom on the fourth—the top floor. I apologize for the long wait."

The chambers had, in reality, been ready a short while ago, but she hadn't wanted Arnold present until her maids were master cleaners. Taking care of the crown prince when they were still learning their jobs would have been unnecessarily stressful.

"You've got a study and a place to sleep, so feel free to move in to the detached palace anytime! If you'd like, I can escort you there right now."

Rishe's enthusiasm did not lessen Arnold's natural sullenness. "*That's* what you came here to tell me?"

"Yes, that's right."

Arnold sighed. "Then what were you so nervous about?"

"Nerves are natural! Do you know how hard my precious maids have worked for this day? This is like a graduation exam for them, so of course I'm nervous!"

Rishe knew how hard the maids had all worked to make it this far. Their days began early in the morning, and they assisted each other whenever they could. Once the maids finished their tasks, they studied reading and writing to put that knowledge to use in their next day's work. Rishe had done all the final checks; the windows were polished to a sparkle and the sheets were pristine. So great was their improvement that their teachers—the senior maids like Diana—were moved to tears.

"Despite my nerves, I am confident that the rooms are of the highest quality. Please, I invite you to come see them."

Arnold sighed again and rested his chin in his hand. "I thought you wanted to live by yourself in that palace."

"Of course I don't! I want to live there with you, Prince Arnold." That was the whole point of a detached wing—to distance Arnold from the main palace, which was far too big for Rishe.

This seemed to surprise the prince, but then his expression softened into a smile. "I see." His gaze almost convinced Rishe that he knew her true intentions. "Another amusing scheme, I presume."

"P-perish the thought!"

He was exactly right, in a way. Maybe he really *could* read minds. Rishe felt her panic rising; if Arnold grew suspicious, he might decide against moving in to the detached palace.

As she fretted, Arnold stood up. "Very well. I'll go along with your little plot. After all, you've already improved one thing for me."

"Huh?" Rishe sputtered. "I have? Improved what?"

"My mood. Let's go."

Rishe glanced at Oliver in confusion, but he just bowed his head, wearing a wry smile and mouthing the words, "Thank you."

I guess His Highness was in a bad mood before I came in?

Somehow, his mood had lightened. Wondering what could have possibly caused that, Rishe hurried to catch up.

"...And this is your bedroom, Your Highness," Rishe told Arnold, standing beside him at the door.

Several maids watched anxiously from a little ways down the hall, likely wondering what he thought of the office he'd just seen. Rishe caught their eyes, smiling and nodding. The maids' faces lit up, and they grabbed for each other's hands. Rishe's cheeks flushed with pleasure at the sight, and then she opened the door.

The color blue dominated the bedroom, which was perfectly neat from one corner to the other. Arnold's would-be bed featured a deep azure canopy, tightly fitted sheets, and fluffy pillows. A round, amber-colored desk sat beside it. A finely woven rug lined the floor, a high-quality piece that muffled Arnold's footsteps to silence and bore not a speck of dust.

"What do you think? It's a fine room, is it not?"

"Yeah."

Arnold's honest praise delighted Rishe. "I consulted with Oliver and decided to give you the bare minimum of furniture, so when you move in, you can bring your own bookshelves and whatever else you might want."

"That works. Still, I'm surprised." Arnold stood in the center of the room, looking around with great interest. "This place hasn't been used in years. I'm impressed you did all this in just three weeks."

She giggled. "Aren't my maids great?"

"Very impressive, indeed." Arnold turned to look at her. "You took new hires and trained them up, correct? They've prepared a palace for the royal family. With the crown prince himself acknowledging their skill, they'll never have trouble finding work again."

"Exactly right," Rishe said. "With that assurance, they need not ever worry about their futures."

"And that's not all they'll gain."

Rishe tilted her head.

"Pride," Arnold explained. "They'll feel pride for a job well done. That may not be a necessity for survival, but there *are* times when it can keep you alive." Slowly, Arnold lowered his eyes. Rishe couldn't say for sure, but he seemed happy. He gazed at her like he was looking at something important. "You've got a talent for making people feel proud of themselves."

Rishe had no idea what he was talking about. She stared back at him, dazed, until his shoulders began to tremble.

"Heh..." A puff of laughter escaped his lips. "Is that any sort of face to make when I compliment you?"

His amusement made her sigh. "I was just trying to see if you were teasing me or not."

"You wound me. Those were my heartfelt thoughts."

"How sad. Well, even if you didn't mean it, I'll happily accept your praise." She'd take a compliment from this incomparable man anytime. Arnold's eyes widened, and Rishe smiled, pleased to get back at him. "By the way, did you notice? This room gets the most sunlight in the entire wing. If you open the window, there's a very pleasant breeze. It's the perfect place to nap."

"I don't often find myself returning to my bedroom during the day, unfortunately," Arnold said. "You should have kept this room for yourself."

"Oh? The best room in the house, for a hostage? I'm planning for a life of ease here; taking this room would be going too far. A shiftless empress-to-be shouldn't have such nice things."

"*Shiftless...*?" Arnold looked dubious but ultimately did not

comment further. "Come to think of it, your room's just next to this one, right?"

"Yes. I figured having our rooms close by would be easier on security."

"That's easier on me too," Arnold agreed. "I might catch wind of your antics before they become a problem."

"Oh, I have no more antics planned, just lazing around from now on. Well..." She paused. "Maybe one or two."

"Don't be stupid," Arnold said softly, exasperated. "You can do as you like as long as you don't put yourself at risk anymore, okay?"

"I'm sorry." Feeling repentant from the scolding, Rishe recalled something she wanted to ask him. "By the way, Your Highness. Speaking of antics, allow me to beg your permission."

"For what?"

At Arnold's wary question, Rishe flashed a sunny smile.

"You're serious about this?" Arnold asked.

Rishe nodded, beaming. "Yes, of course."

They stood in a small training yard in a corner of the palace grounds. The knights who served as Rishe's guards eyed her with worry. They'd all traveled down to the practice area from Arnold's bedroom following a brief exchange...

"Would you do me the honor of dueling with me, Your Highness?" Rishe had inquired after the tour. It had been three weeks since she first brought up the idea, and she was worried he might have forgotten.

It seemed he hadn't. "Come to think of it, you asked the same thing at the party, didn't you?"

"I'm pleased you remembered. The recent difficulties have made me keenly aware of my lack of stamina and immediate need for further training."

Rishe's stamina, musculature, and cardiovascular conditioning were all far from where they had been during her life as a knight. Those

attributes improved gradually over time, so she wanted to begin as soon as possible.

“I know you’re quite busy, but I would very much appreciate some instruction, if only once. Naturally, I wouldn’t ask you to keep me company for the entire training session.” Rishe met Arnold’s eyes. “I’d also like to learn the *secret method* you and the imperial knights use to enhance your training, Your Highness.”

“Huh.” Arnold’s lips curled up in interest. “How did you know about that?”

“My garden is near the knights’ training grounds. I’ve observed the drills of several different squads, and your imperial knights are a cut above the rest.”

Outside of the training sessions, Rishe also observed the knights carefully as they guarded her, noting how they never left themselves open. Not all of Galkhein’s knights were like that—only those serving Arnold. From that, Rishe surmised the obvious: He was directly responsible for their instruction. Unsurprising, seeing as they were led by a man with even more impressive defenses than their own.

“If they have a particular training regimen, I’d love to learn it.”

Rishe vividly recalled a moment of her previous life. *When we fought Galkhein’s army, Arnold was by far the biggest threat, but his knights were no pushovers either.*

They were all frighteningly strong. Not just the unit commanders—each individual knight on the front lines displayed phenomenal skill in battle.

Right now, I believe it’s just Prince Arnold’s personal knights who possess this unusual prowess. I don’t think the rest of Galkhein’s knights are at their level. Which means that in the next five years, he’s going to put together that terrifying army. There was no way he conscripted only superior talents. The scale of the force made that impossible. He must have some specific way of training people up. And if that’s the case, I need to learn it.

Rishe looked at him, a few silent seconds passing. She refused to give in, and their staring contest finally concluded with a short sigh from Arnold. “All right.”

Her eyes widened; she wasn’t expecting him to agree so readily.

His earlier acquiescence had just been for standard training. "Are you sure? Not to work against my own interests here, but isn't it a military secret?"

"It's not a breach of protocol for the crown prince's wife to know his secrets. I did promise I'd do anything you asked of me, after all."

Arnold's voice was softer than usual. It caught Rishe off guard. "Well...thank you. I'm very happy that you said yes."

"You're happy?" Baffled, Arnold stared at Rishe. "Why?"

"Because from what I know, your sword technique is the strongest and most beautiful of anyone in the world."

"..."

As a former knight, she was naturally delighted to learn from someone like that.

Arnold looked stunned for a moment before he smiled. "The whole world, huh?"

"I-I obviously didn't mean that literally!" Rishe rushed to clarify. "It's just an expression, got it?!"

"How could techniques for killing people possibly be beautiful?" Arnold asked with a self-deprecating tone.

"Your Highness...?"

"Go change into something you can move in. I'll meet you at the training grounds."

Thus, they'd met one another outside to square off.

"Bring the restraints," Arnold ordered one of his knights. "One for Rishe and three for me."

"Yes, sir." The knight briskly followed Arnold's command, though he and his comrades spared Rishe a few fretful glances all the while. Returning with a wooden crate, the knight handed it to his master. Arnold reached in and fished something out.

A belt?

"Put this on."

Arnold proffered a harness resembling a pair of suspenders connected to a belt. He explained how to use it, putting his arms through another pair of belts, crossing them over each other, and

fastening them to the one around his waist.

“When you’re done, turn around.”

Rishe did as she was told and turned away from him. One of Arnold’s black-gloved hands grasped Rishe’s left wrist. He wrapped a thin belt around it, brought her arm behind her back, and fastened the belt on her wrist to the one on her waist. With her arm bound this way, she couldn’t use her left hand.

“This is...”

“Our special training consists of binding one part of the body to prevent free use of your limbs,” Arnold said, binding himself in the same way. The only difference was that Rishe had her dominant arm—her right—free, and Arnold did not.

“You always train like this?”

“Not always. Too much and we’d pick up bad habits, rendering it pointless.”

Affixing the belts with a practiced hand, Arnold reached into the crate and brought out something else, leaving the belt on his wrist unconnected. The new tool resembled a modified kneepad, which Arnold proceeded to wrap around his knee.

He’s making it impossible to bend his left leg.

Next, he took out a black eyepatch, covering his right eye and tying the cords behind his head. Finally, a knight reverently stepped forward and fastened Arnold’s wrist to the belt at his waist. All in all, he was left unable to use his dominant right arm, his left leg, or his right eye. Rishe, on the other hand, only lost the use of her left arm.

“We’ll spar like this. Swords.” At Arnold’s signal, one of the knights handed Rishe a wooden practice weapon.

Rishe thanked the knight and took a stance, holding the sword in one hand. She immediately felt how much having one arm bound threw off her center of gravity, as well as the deep strain on her muscles from holding a two-handed sword in a one-handed grip. Yet the training was even more complex than that.

“Do you bind the limbs to simulate a true battlefield?”

“Oh? You can tell?”

“If it was just to improve core and muscle strength, there would

be no need to cover one eye, Your Highness.” Watching Arnold accept his own wooden sword from one of his knights, Rishe went on, “This training is to ensure the loss of a body part on the battlefield doesn’t prevent you from fighting... Am I right?”

“Ha ha!” Arnold laughed with his whole chest, pointing his sword at Rishe. “Your powers of observation are as impressive as always.”

Unlike Rishe, Arnold was using his nondominant arm, made even slower by the old wound on his shoulder. Still, he didn’t leave himself open to attack. “It’s hard to see you as a noble girl who’s never been to war.”

The tension in the air made Rishe’s skin tingle. The knights all took a seemingly unconscious step back, trusting their instincts.

“If you’re injured, you won’t be able to use your arm. If blood splashes on your face, your eye may be temporarily incapacitated. But the battle rages on, and your enemies will continue to press you.”

Vivid memories of the battlefield swirled in Rishe’s mind.

“If your arm is torn off, keep swinging your sword. If your leg is smashed, keep moving forward. If you lose both eyes, find a way to cut into your enemy for as long as you have left.” Arnold fixed his eyes on Rishe, his gaze razor-sharp. “That’s what all this is for.”

How can he convey such pressure with one eye covered up?

“Training in these circumstances helps us stay alive out there.”

Rishe swallowed. *No wonder I couldn’t beat him...*

The knightly chivalry Rishe knew was akin to an art. Even with a sword in hand, fighting for one’s country, beauty, and nobility was important. The greatest honor was in a clean fight—one that shamed neither you nor your enemy—and ultimately offering your life in exchange for your lord’s. During her time as a knight, Rishe staked her life on protecting the royal family she served, and in the end, she had died.

Galkhein’s knights are trained to continue struggling despite disgrace, no matter the situation they find themselves in. To that end, they kill as many enemies as they possibly can.

Rishe had faced this man as a foe before, and fate might yet again pit the two of them against each other. She squeezed the wooden sword in her hand.

Arnold chuckled. “Normally, I’d wait to spar with a knight until they’ve been through basic training. But since I’m up against you, I’m covering just one eye, not both.”

“...I’m honored, Your Highness.”

“No need to worry. I don’t intend to let any harm come to my bride before our wedding.” Arnold’s confidence clearly stemmed from the overwhelming difference in their abilities.

After a moment’s thought, she said, “If I win, would you answer one question of mine, no matter what it is? In exchange, if I lose, I’ll do any one thing you ask of me, Your Highness.”

Arnold looked momentarily startled before smiling. He seemed to be looking forward to another potential scheme. “Very well.”

“All right,” said Rishe. “Let’s do this.”

A knight gave the signal to start, and Arnold brandished his wooden sword at Rishe. His form was beautiful, but it was full of holes. It clearly said, *Come at me*.

The lopsided skill level was nothing new to Rishe, and she didn’t hesitate to take up her own sword, once again confirming the state of her limbs. The belt on her left arm was attached to her back by a hook. She wasn’t bound particularly tightly—she still had some range of motion—but her range was limited by the structure of her joints. Plus, just holding the heavy wooden sword with one arm was difficult, thanks to her current lack of muscle.

The longer we exchange blows, the worse my disadvantage becomes. I have to launch a direct attack!

Rishe took a short breath and leapt into Arnold’s striking range in a single bound. Arnold didn’t move. She swung her sword diagonally, aiming for the right side of his face.

Clang! A loud sound rang out as Arnold lifted his blade to catch Rishe’s blow. She’d put muscle into her swing, but the impact didn’t so much as jar his arm.

So that’s how it is, huh? In that case...!

She pivoted, spinning with the force of the blow. Arnold easily blocked her second swing as well. Their swords crossed and clashed, their eyes likewise locking from either side.

Arnold's one uncovered eye narrowed in mirth. "What's wrong? Is that all you've got?"

Rishe shivered at Arnold's sincere enjoyment. She sprang back and held her sword up once more, catching her breath.

My center of gravity's completely off. My grip isn't strong enough. Yearning to use both of my hands is holding me back! She listed off the problems facing her, trying to think of countermeasures. If I reorient my center of gravity, my reach will change. I'll have to advance further to get in range of His Highness.

She calculated the distance in her head and planted her feet where they'd need to be. Since she couldn't do anything about her grip strength, she compensated by holding the sword higher to transfer more strength down the length of the blade. She had to ensure she didn't try to regain her balance with her left arm either. Makeshift solutions wouldn't secure her victory, but they were better than nothing.

One more time.

Arnold goaded her with a look. Rishe took a breath, exhaled, and lunged. "Yah!"

He blocked her first swing. She pulled back, slashing at him twice more, forcing herself into close quarters. She tried an upward swing, but he blocked that too, pushing her back.

"Huh..." He sounded impressed.

He'd stopped her. But before now, he'd just been holding his sword up to parry her blows. This was the first time there was any real swordplay brought to bear. Rishe jumped back again, gaining some distance from him.

"Hey. Lady Rishe has only exchanged a few blows with His Highness, but her form has changed a lot, hasn't it?"

"It doesn't seem possible, but...you might be right."

Ignoring the knights' commentary, Rishe rushed at Arnold. She strove to find a way forward as he blocked and repelled her attacks.

"Your movements are stiff. Don't challenge me with your strength. Make better use of your feet."

Rishe gasped at his critiques before immediately adjusting her strategy as they sparred. She knew she could never beat a man in a

contest of strength and thought back to when she'd been desperate to make up for that weakness.

"Use your agility. Step in with your left foot. A little farther. That's not enough; one more step. There."

Rishe stepped forward as Arnold suggested, engaging again and again. She was getting the knack back. It was a strange feeling, like she'd done this so long ago yet so recently at the same time. For his part, Arnold's guidance was straightforward and precise.

Wow. It took me five years to move like this in my life as a knight.

Arnold could likely judge the best strategy just by looking his opponent up and down, but Rishe had no intention of giving up. As she got back into the swing of things, her field of view opened more and more, granting her the ability to read Arnold the same way he was reading her. The Arnold Hein of that one fateful day flashed through her mind.

Right!

She pulled back, the blow coming from exactly where she expected. Arnold's sword just barely scraped against Rishe's. If she hadn't dodged when she did, he would have sent her weapon flying.

Now he'll step into my reach and swing down from above!

In her battle with Arnold five years from now, he'd moved in just the same way. Rishe the knight had parried the blow with a defensive stance. She remembered how, but her current physique couldn't take that strain. Instead, she took one more step back, feeling Arnold's sword graze her bangs.

"Ngh!" She knew he would stop before his sword actually hit her, but she broke into a cold sweat regardless, instinctively afraid. She dodged with everything she had, losing her balance and staggering back a few steps.

Arnold pulled his strike at the last second, expression changing. "You said that as far as you know, my swordplay is the strongest there is."

That was what Rishe had told him in their earlier conversation.

"But just now, you reacted as if you'd faced someone even stronger than I am. You're thinking of him as we cross swords, aren't you?"

Is that a joke? Arnold wore a provocative smile, but his gaze was sharp. Rishe adjusted her sword grip.

“It’s almost enough to make me jealous.”

“You jest,” she said, boldly meeting his eyes. “And I meant what I said! You’re the strongest person that I know, Prince Arnold.”

He wasn’t wrong, per se. Rishe was thinking of the Emperor Arnold Hein from five years in the future. *He was stronger, crueler, and far more imposing than the current crown prince.* That man had slaughtered her entire order of knights. *He* would never condescend to saying something like, “I have no intention of letting any harm come to you.”

“Come, now. Pay a little more attention to me.” Arnold smirked, relishing the exchange. This newly casual tone he was taking with her made him actually seem like the nineteen-year-old boy he was.

In response, Rishe held her sword up and lowered her stance. She took a step forward, then another, slowly closing the distance between them.

Arnold raised his own weapon. They breathed as one, and she lunged forward, striking out to the side. He dodged her slash. Rishe slipped past him and spun around without a moment’s delay. Arnold turned at the same time, swiping out at her. Their swords made strong contact.

“Ngh!”

The blades clashed up high, went low, then clashed high again. The *clack* of wood smacking against wood rang out, and Rishe’s hand went numb. Arnold might’ve had one eye covered and one leg restrained, but you never would have known from the way he moved.

I’m not done yet!

She took half a step back, then sprang forward again, swinging her sword once more. Arnold dodged backward and Rishe’s sword hit air, but she didn’t stop her charge.

That feeling... The moment I was able to land one blow on Arnold Hein!

She scoured her memory, putting all her strength into her final attack. For a split second, Arnold’s face lit up with surprise. Then he slashed out and knocked Rishe’s blade off course.

It was over.

“Ack!” The sword flew from her hand, grazing the cheek of a dazed knight spectator, and finally slammed into the training area’s stone walls.

“Whoa!”

“Oh no, are you okay?! Agh!” Rishe tried to run over to the knights, but her legs gave out and she fell to her knees.

“I’m impressed.” Arnold looked down at Rishe, not even a little out of breath. “I only planned on taking a single step at most, you know. I underestimated you.”

“As if you weren’t dripping with handicaps!”

“If it were anyone other than you, I wouldn’t have had to move at all.”

Ignoring Rishe, whose shoulders were heaving as she tried to catch her breath, Arnold signaled the knights. One of them rushed over and undid his restraints. Arnold removed the knee restraint on his own and knelt in front of Rishe, freeing her left arm.

“Thank you very much...for your instruction...”

Rishe had known the loss was inevitable, but it still disappointed her. It must have shown on her face because Arnold rested his elbow on his knee, chin in his palm, and smiled. “What was our agreement? That you’d do any one thing I asked you to?”

“Yes, go ahead and ask!” Rishe declared, hopeless. “I don’t go back on my word!”

Without a serious chance of winning, Rishe had ensured this was a bet worth making whether she won or lost. If by some miracle she’d won, she would’ve been allowed one question of the crown prince. If she lost—as she’d suspected she would—she could see what kind of request he’d make. Thus, she was one step closer to figuring out why he’d proposed to her.

This is all according to plan. I’m not mad about it... Nope, not even a little. She tried to convince herself otherwise, but she was incredibly frustrated.

Arnold watched her for a time, eventually removing his eyepatch and saying, “Well, let’s see... Leave your afternoon open two days from

now. We're going into town."

"Into town? Of course I'll come, but what are we doing, exactly?"

"I'll tell you then." Arnold stood, handing his eyepatch to a waiting knight.

Hmm... Some kind of "crown prince and fiancée" official business?

Rishe decided there was no use pondering the matter now, although she realized that she hadn't been in town since she went to see Mr. Tully. She'd snuck out, gotten caught, and thereafter promised Arnold she wouldn't visit the town without him.

He was always a step ahead of her. As she stared off into the distance, he stared down at her, perplexed.

"What's wrong? Get up already."

From the ground, Rishe wouldn't meet his eyes. "Uh...I'll stay here for a little longer. Please feel free to leave, Your Highness."

"Why?"

She didn't *want* to tell him, but she figured she had to. Resigning herself to her shame, she slowly said, "Well, to tell you the truth, my arms and legs are still shaking from our little match."

"What...?"

"My body isn't equipped to keep up with how I was moving." Rishe felt truly pathetic. If she tried to stand now, she'd just fall face-first back to the ground. "I'm just taking a little rest. I'll be sure to close up the training ground when I leave, so don't worry... Uh, Your Highness?"

His expression turned pensive. "Wearing gloves means it's fine, right?"

"Huh?" Rishe had a very bad feeling. Her instincts were telling her to say no, but she didn't know what he was asking. Before she could properly reply, Arnold knelt in front of her and reached out with his gloved hands.

"Ack?! Wh—! Hey! Your Highness, I—"

Rishe was lifted abruptly from the ground, Arnold holding her in his arms. As soon as Rishe's mind had caught up, she opened her mouth and screamed. "Wh-whaaa?!" She reflexively flailed her legs.

Arnold studied her, the picture of calm. “Don’t struggle. You’ll fall.”

“W-well, no, I... What are you *doing*?!”

“You can’t stand on your own, right?” Arnold asked, striding off as he carried Rishe bridal-style.

Realizing he intended to take her all the way to her room like this, Rishe blanched. “Let me down, let me down, let me dooown! I just need a breather, so please don’t trouble yourself!”

“Again, don’t struggle.”

Why not?! It’s not like struggling will do me a bit of good! Rishe kept that thought to herself as Arnold looked at her in exasperation.

“Do you really think I could just leave my fiancée on the ground and go back to work?”

Okay, maybe he’s got a point, but still!

Rishe had an iron grip on her composure in ordinary circumstances, but this was just too much. Arnold Hein himself was carrying her in his arms! With her limbs still immobile from fatigue, there was nothing she could do to extricate herself from this situation. She gazed at the knights imploringly, but when their eyes met, the men just furiously shook their heads. They were as flustered as she was.

S-somebody, save me! She was shouting on the inside, but no one came to her rescue.

The knights they passed on their way out of the training area watched them with blank looks of shock, like they were seeing something incomprehensible. To his credit, Arnold chose a route to avoid contact with crowds, although reaching the detached wing without meeting *anyone* would have been impossible.

“Your Highness!” Rishe yelled. “Isn’t carrying me around like this exhausting?”

“If you’re worried about that, make it easier on me and stop struggling.”

She’d been arguing for her release, but now she’d gone and made it harder to complain. At a complete loss, Rishe noticed something even more outrageous.

Huh?!

All this time, she'd been holding on to the lapel of Arnold's jacket. She must have grabbed it automatically when he picked her up and had been squeezing it ever since. *Should I let go? I should let go, right? But what do I do with my hand after that?*

Her head was spinning, but Arnold spoke to her, completely unaware of her consternation. "Come to think of it, what *did* you want to ask me?"

Rishe looked up at him, not expecting the question.

"Before the duel, you said you wanted to ask me something if you won."

"You want to talk about this *now*?"

"Heh."

He's laughing!

Arnold *had* noticed her distress, and he was clearly enjoying it. But he was also helping her when she couldn't move on her own. She didn't have strong grounds for an objection.

Eventually, Rishe changed tack and outright bombarded Arnold with questions instead. "When is your birthday?!"

Puzzled, Arnold blinked a few times and answered, "The twenty-eighth day of the twelfth month."

"So you were born in winter! And what are your hobbies?"

"I don't really have any."

"Come on, tell me what you like to do, Your Highness!"

"I've never really thought about it."

"What sort of woman do you prefer, then?"

"Why do you care?"

Despite his willingness to answer, she barely squeezed any information out of him. He didn't dodge her questions, though. His responses seemed sincere.

I can't ask my real question out in public...especially not in this position!

Dwelling on her predicament once more, Rishe was reminded of just how uncomfortable she was. Even in the face of her renewed resistance, Arnold refused to put her down.

“L-Lady Rishe?!” Rishe’s attendant Elsie squeaked as they arrived at her room in the detached palace. Even the impassive Elsie gaped when she saw her mistress in Arnold’s arms.

“Elsie!” Her maid rushed over to her, and Rishe clung to Elsie as soon as her feet hit the floor.

Seeing Rishe’s exhausted state, Arnold said, “Keep resting; don’t push yourself before the feeling returns to your arms and legs.”

I’m not feeling faint from the duel anymore! she thought, but she swallowed it down.

Declaring he had work to do, Arnold returned to the main palace. As soon as he was out of sight, the knights—who normally never entered Rishe’s room—ran mindlessly to her side.

“Are you all right, Lady Rishe?!”

“We’re so sorry we weren’t able to help you! There was nothing we could do! We were powerless on several fronts!”

“I-It’s fine...” Rishe said. “I understand your position.” The two knights had at least warned observers off with fierce eyes and expressions on their way here. She appreciated that.

“Still,” one of them added, “you’re not hurt, are you? Uh, not from that—from training with His Highness.”

“Don’t worry, I’m perfectly fine.”

Just as Arnold promised, he hadn’t let any harm come to Rishe. Another aspect of his superior skills.

“I’m glad to hear it,” one knight told her. “We were awfully surprised to hear Prince Arnold planned to give you his special training, Lady Rishe.”

“That was the safest of his special training methods,” said the other.

Then today’s match was just one of several drills, like I thought. Arnold had more strategies up his sleeve. Her suspicions confirmed, Rishe closed her eyes. *Well, I don’t need to attend the maids’ training every morning anymore. My field isn’t quite stable yet, but it only needs a couple of checks a day. My dealings with the Aria Trading Company are waiting on Mr. Tully. I have plenty of other preparations, but once I get started on those I won’t have time for anything else. If I want to do this, now’s the time.*

Renewing her determination, she looked at her maid. “I’m sorry if I gave you a shock, Elsie. Has my order arrived from the Aria Trading Company?”

“Yes, Lady Rishe. It’s right here.” Elsie gestured toward a crate in the corner of the room.

I’ll have to act fast. Thankfully, that duel has scraped off some of the rust. Rishe clenched her fists. *Time to get started on the stamina-building section of my plan for a long and cushy life!*

That day, a score of trainees gathered in the palace’s fifth training ground—youths who straddled the border between childhood and adolescence. Clad in brand-new training garb, they listened tensely as a knight addressed them.

“That will be your schedule for the next ten days. As I mentioned, this training will focus on you new recruits who have yet to become knights. For some, this is part of your noble education. For others, it is a chance to select promising personnel from the citizenry. Keep that in mind,” the knight said, eyeing a few of the lined-up trainees. “No matter your birth, results are valued above all else. I look forward to seeing how you all progress.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Hmm... You there.” The instructor addressed a young boy with brown hair standing at the back of the pack. “Lucius, was it? Excellent projection, son. Speak from the stomach and your voice will carry even on the battlefield.”

“Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!” Rishe—addressed by the male name of Lucius—gave a vigorous response. She’d slightly altered her face with makeup, donned a boyish, short-styled wig, and now stood tall with a binding cloth wrapped around her chest to flatten it.



Good. A successful infiltration.

Her life as a knight wasn't Rishe's first time cross-dressing. As a merchant, she had traveled the world selling her wares. Even though she'd hired a handful of guards, setting off on voyages was still dangerous for a young woman, so she often dressed as a man when she was lacking in protection. The name she was using now, Lucius, was the same name she'd used for past disguises.

It doesn't look like anyone's realized yet. No one here knows me, after all.

Her coral-colored hair was carefully folded on top of her head under a net—even very long hair could be corralled with this method. On top of that, she wore a high-quality wig she'd ordered from the Aria Trading Company.

I've disguised myself thoroughly, but it's thanks to Prince Theodore that no one suspects my background.

When Rishe had asked him for this favor, Theodore, the younger prince of Galkhein, grimaced spectacularly. "Are you really asking me for this?"

Yesterday, she had visited him in his office, where he'd reacted to her request with palpable disgust. Tossing his unruly black hair, he put both elbows on his desk, resting his head in his hands. "You want to join the cadets' training, and as a *man*? First of all, you're crazy. Second, why do *I* have to help?"

"Well, didn't you answer that in your own letter? You told me I could count on you whenever I needed to."

"I did! I don't know why, but I did!" Theodore blushed, his voice jumping in volume. Clearly, he wanted to hear no mention of the letter. "Listen, Sister. When I wrote that, it was with the understanding that you'd request something from the people in the slums or the city's underground."

"Unfortunately, what I need most is stamina. And not for just my own sake—it's for Prince Arnold's as well."

"What am I gonna do...? I can't understand a single thing my sister-in-law is saying to me." Theodore leaned back in his wide chair and stared off into the distance. "Why do you need to join the cadets at all, Sister? Couldn't you just assign a knight to train you?"

“I wouldn’t ask anyone to devote that much time for my sake. And if I *were* to do that, they’d struggle to know how to treat me,” Rishe said. “I want to train without anyone holding back on my account.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe you.” Theodore stuck out his tongue in disgust. “I would never volunteer to punish myself like that.”

Rishe didn’t want to *punish* herself; she just wanted to make up for what she lacked.

“The training period is ten days, right? Once it’s over, I’ll just train on my own. But since I came all the way to this country, I might as well experience the Galkhein military’s renowned instruction.”

Theodore—who’d been listening with a face as though he longed to be anywhere else—suddenly lit up. “Wait a sec!”

“Er, Prince Theodore...?”

“I just realized something.” The prince had a sweet, girlish smile on his face. It was mildly frightening. He stood, braced a hand on his desk, and peered at Rishe. “Very well. I’ll help you out, my *lovely* sister. I’ll do everything in my power to grant your request.”

“Huh? Well, I appreciate that, but why the sudden change of heart?”

“Because it seems interesting.” Theodore giggled; he must have had some scheme up his sleeve. “I don’t think even my brother could see this coming. His own wife dressing as a man and joining his knight corps!” The prince sat back down, his mood much improved. “Okay, you’ve got me! Let’s do it! I’ll never have such a good opportunity to surprise my brother again.”

“I’m not doing this to surprise Prince Arnold! And didn’t you make up with your brother, Prince Theodore?”

“I want the full array of my brother’s emotional reactions, you see.” Theodore’s expression of affection was as bizarre as always. He hummed as he discussed plans with Rishe. “I’ll make up some background for you—look for my contact later. Should I make it look like you have previous experience with the sword? You *did* beat up all my men. It would make no sense to pretend you’re inexperienced.”

“Y-you seem confident with this sort of deception...”

“Heh heh. What do you think? I’m already proving useful, aren’t I?” Theodore puffed out his chest, pulling some documents out of a

drawer. It didn't exactly surprise Rishe; he *had* been the one to sneak Elsie into Rishe's maids.

"Just make sure you're not found out by my brother until it's all over. There's no reason he'd show up at the cadet training grounds, but you should still be careful. I'll make the arrangements, so you can go for now."

"Very well." Rishe bowed. "Thank you, Prince Theodore."

She had just turned to leave when he called out to her. "Hey, listen. I'm overseeing some pending legislation to support the people of the slums." Rishe glanced back, but Theodore was still searching for his documents and hadn't raised his head. "They only went through because my brother pushed them from behind the scenes."

"The two of you are working on it together, then?"

"You...could put it that way, yeah."

That would have been unthinkable just a short while ago. Arnold had been keeping his brother at a distance, while Theodore avoided doing any official political work for his brother's sake. Rishe was delighted to hear that they were working together on a project.

"That's all I wanted to tell you," he said. "See you later."

Taking a good look around, Rishe noticed that Theodore's office was extremely neat. According to the maids' gossip, it had been covered in dust until just recently.

"Don't get hurt during the training either. You're my brother's fiancée."

"Of course. Thank you for your concern, Prince Theodore." Rishe smiled brightly and bowed again.

Then she left, which brings us to the present.

"Haah..."

After training, Rishe sat at the now-deserted water station. Until a little while ago, there had been plenty of other recruits, but they all regained their energy quickly and left to go change. Among the lot of them, only "Lucius," Rishe in disguise, was unable to move.

This is Galkhein's basic training?!

They'd started the day with running. In Rishe's experience, "running" meant going down a set course, trying to improve your pace

each time you did so. But the training these cadets did was different. They'd been ordered to run for an hour and a half straight without regard to distance. The instructor merely specified, "jog at a slightly faster pace than walking."

At first, Rishe had thought this was rather lenient, but when she actually tried it, she found it harsh. The other trainees seemed to struggle as well, but as they were all genuine boys and men, they had an easier time finishing the course than Rishe did.

Their next task—upper-body conditioning—was much the same. They performed exercises that skated toward unreasonable difficulty for minutes at a time, taking breaks between sets. Even if the initial sets were no problem, your fatigue would compound until your whole upper body felt dragged down by a dull weight.

Then they ran some more. After a final session of conditioning, their training ended for the day. Ordered to eat a light meal, they received chicken sandwiches, though many of them were in no state to eat. They wouldn't put on muscle without protein, though, so they choked the food down.

Cadet training was in the morning. For her "I'm going to sleep in until noon for a while, so please don't wake me!" story to hold up, Rishe needed to hurry back to her maids and guards.

I haven't trained in a long time. No, I'm conditioning this body for the first time. This will be easier than the rookie training I did as a knight, but I'm still feeling the burn. It feels just as hard.

A dull pain settled in her upper arms, muscles already aching. Imagining the soreness yet to come, Rishe sighed.

I feel warm, at least. She closed her eyes, enjoying the cool breeze caressing her cheek, when someone approached her from behind.

"Yo, Lucius! You're still not changed?"

Rishe whirled around to find a young man smiling at her cheerfully. The boy had cropped, chestnut-brown hair and almond-shaped eyes. He was a trainee like Rishe. When Rishe had fallen behind on their run, he'd lagged behind too out of concern.

"I appreciate what you did for me earlier. I believe your name was Fritz, was it not?" she said.

"Ha ha! Don't make it into a big deal. We're all in the same boat,

right? And you don't have to be so stiff."

"All right. Thanks anyway, though."

"Sure! I'll speak plainly with ya too, if that's okay." Fritz beamed in satisfaction, sitting down beside Rishe. "I was about to head back to my lodgings, but I was kinda worried about you. Can you walk?"

"Well, I'd like to say I'm fine, but...I think I'll just rest for a while longer." The cadence she'd spoken with as knight came out more easily than she'd expected. It had been a while, but Fritz was easy to talk to. That probably helped.

"I'll stay behind too, then."

"Huh? No need to worry about me. You should go back and rest! You must be tired."

"It's fine. I wanted to talk to you, Lucius. You got a compliment from the instructor when you spoke up during his speech, right? But then when the actual training started, you looked like you were dying. You're an interesting guy." He gave her a toothy grin, expression broad and open. "I come from far away, so I don't have any friends here. You ever hear of Ceutena? It's a port town in the north. Ships from Coyolles berth there sometimes."

Coyolles was a place Rishe was intimately familiar with. The snowy country was on the other side of the sea from Galkhein, remote and cold. Rishe had lived there in one of her previous lives.

"I've never been to Ceutena, but I know the name. They have great fish there, right?"

"Ha ha, you get tired of it! It's a nice town, though. If I didn't look up to him so much, I wouldn't have bothered to become a knight. I would've just lived my whole life there."

"Look up to who?"

Fritz's grin widened, and he thrust his finger at Rishe. "Crown Prince Arnold, of course!"

Rishe froze, but Fritz didn't seem to notice as he happily prattled on. "A war hero, a master of the sword, a political genius! People say all sorts of stuff about him, but he's just so cool, isn't he?!"

"Ahh...y-yeah..." Rishe managed a half-hearted response, averting her eyes.

“Things were pretty bad during the war three years ago, even up in our port town, but Prince Arnold was amazing! He evacuated the citizens and then took down a whole boatload of enemies! He utilized the terrain or whatever. I didn’t fully understand the details.”

“O-oh?”

“It’s not fair that he’s so good with a sword *and* can do strategy and stuff! I want to ask the knights about him, but it sounds like only his personal guard can really get close.”

Seeing Fritz talk about Arnold with his eyes sparkling made Rishe feel strangely discomfited.

“I only saw him once, but Prince Arnold’s swordplay isn’t just strong, it’s beautiful.”

Hearing that, Rishe couldn’t help herself from mumbling, “Yeah, I get that.” When she realized what she’d said, her face flushed. *Wait, what did I just...?!*

“Right?! We agree! So—wait. That means you’ve seen Prince Arnold wield his sword, right?”

“J-just one time!”

Fritz paid no heed to the blush spreading across her cheeks. She hung her head, hoping he wouldn’t think she was strange. Her face refused to cool down. *Why not? I’ve told him myself I think his swordplay is beautiful! And just recently too!* Come to think of it, Arnold had been surprised to hear such praise.

As Rishe’s mind spun in circles, Fritz continued breezily, “Even if I can’t become like Prince Arnold, I want to get stronger.”

Fritz stood and picked up a broom in the corner of the water station. He held it like a sword and took a combat stance. “Hah!” The broom sliced through the air.

Confused, Rishe looked up. “Fritz. Tighten the grip of your pinky.”

Still holding the strike, Fritz glanced at Rishe. “My pinky?”

“Yes. When you hold a sword, your grip should be strongest around your pinky. If you’re right-handed, grip the hilt harder with your left hand. Let your right be about half that tight.”

“Is half enough?”

“Your grip will be uneven without that balance. Don’t let your

wrists... Yeah, now swing it like that.”

“Like this? Hah!” The broom swung down, hissing more sharply through the air. Its trajectory—formerly diagonal—went straight down. With the adjusted grip, he was no longer wasting his strength.

“Whoa!” Fritz observed the difference in the swings. “How do you know all this, Lucius?”

“I have a bit of experience with the sword, that’s all. You’re impressive though, Fritz! You learn fast.”

“No way, *you’re* the impressive one!” Fritz looked down at the broom in his grip, eyes shining. “I didn’t know just a little instruction could make such a difference... Maybe I really can become like Prince Arnold one day!”

“You two,” came a man’s voice from behind them, and Fritz and Rishe turned to see him. “You must not speak so casually of the royal family. You would do well to call him His Highness the Crown Prince.”

“Y-yes, sir! Sorry, sir!” Fritz bowed. Rishe stood and joined him.

“As long as you understand. Be at ease, both of you.”

Permission granted, the two of them looked back up. The man appeared to be in his mid-thirties, his gray hair worn slightly long and fixed in place with product. He was clean and neat, but dark circles haunted his eyes. Despite his scolding, he had a gentle air about him, and he carried himself like a high-ranking noble. He was tall, his musculature obvious even through his clothes.

“No matter what form it takes, admiration for the royal family is a wonderful thing.”

“Yes, thank you, sir! Umm, by the way... Pardon me for asking, but are you Lord Lawvine? Ruler of our town?”

“Indeed,” the man said. “I am the count and heir to House Lawvine.”

Rishe’s eyes widened. *Wait, this is His Lordship Ludger Lars Lawvine?*

She looked back at the man before her, swallowing nervously. *He’s the brave general of Galkhein destined to be slaughtered by Prince Arnold as an “enemy of the state.”*

Ludger Lars Lawvine was the count who governed Galkhein’s

northernmost territory. His sin was attempting to prevent Emperor Arnold Hein's spread of tyranny. Though his holding was remote, he was a man of distinguished military service, adored by a great many people. Yet this loyal retainer would be killed by the very man he served. Three years from now, he would object to Emperor Arnold's war of conquest, and, enraged, the emperor would take his life in retaliation.

I heard all sorts of rumors: He was slowly tortured to death, he was beheaded in one strike... Emperor Arnold Hein put his entire family to death to atone for Lord Lawvine's treason.

Lawvine's execution was a source of Arnold's universal infamy. And here he was, standing before Rishe in real time. She shrank under the scrutiny of his gray eyes. Though his bearing was relaxed, he had a demeanor that screamed "military man."

The count of the north... An officer talented enough to be trusted with the border.

She wouldn't be surprised if he easily figured out that she was a woman. Rishe shuddered at the thought.

As her anxiety peaked, he said, "How do you feel about chicken?"
"Huh?" Her jaw dropped.

Lord Lawvine continued to look at her like he'd said something exceedingly normal. Ignoring Rishe and Fritz's confusion, he went on dispassionately, "If you don't like chicken, any other meat will do. And there's legumes, eggs, and milk... Or are you not a fan of those either?"

"N-no, I like them! I like all food!"

"I see. That's good."

What the heck is this conversation?!

Much as she yearned to ask, the count's manner shut out all possibility of questioning. Just as she expected, he solemnly added, "If your circumstances allow such indulgence, you should eat more. You appear to have less muscle mass than the average man."

Oh, is that all?

"Yes, sir! Thank you for your advice!" Rishe said, relaxing.

She had learned plenty about the sort of food needed to cultivate a strong body in her life as an apothecary. Such wisdom wasn't yet

widespread, but that was likely what Lawvine was referring to.

Still, I already proved during my life as a knight that I'll never have the muscle mass as a man, no matter how much I eat.

Lawvine nodded in satisfaction. "Youths like you should always aim to improve yourselves. I'll be assisting with your instruction starting tomorrow. I look forward to seeing how you perform."

"Wow, you'll be teaching us, Lord Lawvine?! Awesome! Oops... I mean, uh, I am most honored!"

Upon seeing how excited Fritz was, Lawvine's expression relaxed a little. "I am overjoyed to have a hand in training promising young people. I was detained later than I meant to be, so I couldn't attend today's practice. What are your thoughts?"

Fritz and Rishe exchanged a glance, and Fritz was first to answer. "To be honest, I found it very accommodating! I was prepared to run until I puked or train until I couldn't stand up anymore!"

"I was surprised too," Rishe said. "We were allowed breaks to drink water and rest between exercises. I've heard some stories of knight training in other countries—they're far harsher on new recruits."

"True." The count offered an understanding nod. "It was the same here until just a few years ago. During the war, we needed battle-ready forces as fast as we could get them. By training new recruits harshly, you weed out those who can't hack it and send the rest to the front lines as quickly as possible. But...ah, *someone* did away with those harsh practices. You two can rest easy."

Come to think of it... Arnold's attendant, Oliver, had mentioned that he'd suffered an injury and thus couldn't become a knight. If Oliver's injury had occurred during training, Rishe could easily guess who might have changed those practices.

"What we—your seniors, that is—are charged with is not to pick out exceptional youths but to encourage everyone's growth. I'll see you two at training. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Lawvine turned to speak with an approaching knight. "Lord Lawvine, His Majesty awaits your arrival. Please report to the audience chamber."

"Right, I'll be there presently. Tomorrow then, you two."

Fritz and Rishe bowed as Lawvine left the training grounds.

“Thank you for speaking to us!”

Rishe felt the cogs of her mind turning as she held the pose. *His Majesty, huh? I've never met him myself, but he lives here in the palace, doesn't he?*

She had been in Galkhein for over a month. The palace was expansive, true enough, but for Rishe to have failed to run into him even once implied someone was deliberately preventing an encounter. *Not that I'm His Majesty's highest concern right now...*

By and by, she looked up to find Fritz taking deep breaths, a hand splayed on his chest. “Whew, that was nerve-racking, wasn't it, Lucius? I never expected to speak with Lord Lawvine!”

“Really? You looked like you kept your cool, Fritz.”

“No way! Although it's nice to hear you say that. Anyway, are you free? Let's eat together!”

As much as Rishe would have loved to join him, she had places to be. “Sorry, I'm afraid I have to go. I have work in the afternoon.”

“Got it. Bit of a shame, but there's no way around it. Good luck at work!”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow!”

Rishe jogged off the training grounds, slipped into a nearby storage room, and removed her wig. Instead of changing into her dress, she put on a maid's uniform. Placing her training clothes in a laundry basket, she covered it with some sheets and returned to the detached palace disguised as a servant. She entered her room in her usual fashion: via the balcony. Her arms quivered on her way up the rope, nearly bringing her to tears.

“I'm back, Elsie!”

“Welcome back! I've got everything prepared for you.”

She took a quick bath with some help from Elsie, her only maid in on the cross-dressing. Rinsing off the sweat, she changed into a clean dress and dolled herself up. Drying the light waves of her coral hair, she ran a comb through it—and thus her preparations were complete.

“Good morning, Lady Rishe!”

“Morning, everyone...”

Her fatigue leaked into her tone, endangering her cover story of

sleeping until noon before relaxing in the bath, but her maids didn't seem to notice. Returning to her room from the bath chamber with a handful of maids, she ran into an unexpected guest.

"Prince Arnold."

"Hey."

Before she could exclaim how fortuitous she found their meeting, Rishe realized why he was here. Accompanying him were several knights, all carrying things into the space prepared for Arnold's office.

"How's the move going?" she asked.

"Who can say? I'm not the one doing it."

"My lord—I mean, Your Highness! Your instructions are far too general..."

Oliver poked his head out of the office. Seeing Rishe, he smiled. "If it isn't Lady Rishe! Thank you for the wonderful room you've prepared for His Highness."

"Of course, Oliver. I just hope it proves to be a productive work environment. Apropos of nothing, did you just call His Highness 'my lord'?" She glanced at Arnold. He looked extremely unamused.

"I keep telling him to stop using that title—it's creepy. He won't listen to me."

"More importantly, do you want last month's documents on the right-hand bookshelf? Please, just come inside." Oliver returned to the office, directing the knights.

That title... Is it just me, or is he attempting to clearly denote Prince Arnold as his master rather than the emperor?

She made a mental note to inquire further. As she considered the matter, Arnold called her name.

"Rishe." He bent down and whispered directly into her ear. "Come to the western gate tomorrow at two in the afternoon. Don't let anyone see you."

His husky voice tickled her ear. As Arnold pulled away, Rishe reached up, cupping a hand around her mouth to whisper back, "Should I dye my hair?"

"No need to go that far."

“Very well. I’ll wear something appropriate for town.” She dropped back down and stepped away from Arnold, when she noticed the maids staring at them.

Wh-what?

The maids were watching Rishe and Arnold with flushed cheeks and glittering eyes. It hadn’t occurred to her how their furtive whispers might read to an audience.

“Your Highness, *please!*” called Oliver from the office.

“Shut up! I’m coming.” Arnold followed him in a huff. Rishe parted ways with the rest of the twittering maids, heading back to her room with Elsie, who was also acting strange.

“Um, Lady Rishe, why were you speaking in secret just now?”

“Well, you see, Elsie—I’ve got an engagement with Prince Arnold tomorrow,” Rishe said. “Outside the palace.”

Elsie’s eyes lit up. “What sort of outing will this be?”

“He didn’t tell me. But it was an order, so I’m sure he just wants help with some official business.”

“...”

“Regardless, I need to dress covertly tomorrow. Would a brown dress work, you think? I have a gray robe as well; I can scuff it up to look like I’ve been traveling... Oh!” Rishe exclaimed as Elsie grasped her hand.

“Leave it to me, Lady Rishe.”

“Huh? Leave wha—”

“You must absolutely, *positively* leave tomorrow’s preparations to me. Don’t worry, you’ll look cute as a button, my lady!”

“Umm...” Elsie’s impassioned declaration gave Rishe a bad feeling. “Listen, Elsie, I’m just going into town for business, so don’t trouble yourself!”

“It’s no trouble! Your clothes, your hair, everything must be perfect!”

Rishe had never seen Elsie this motivated. She was vibrating with excitement, blind to the discomfort she was causing her mistress.

“I’ll make sure you look fit for town, but your clothes can’t be

drab!”

“Uh...”

“I’ll borrow some clothes from Miss Diana. In fact, I’ll go fetch her right now!”

“My, you two really get along well now, don’t you...? Hey, wait a second!”

The next day, after finishing up her morning cadet training, Rishe set out to meet Arnold following some extraordinarily motivated preparations by Elsie. She met him with her hood pulled low over her face, and they set out through a hidden passageway reserved for the royal family. Walking through the underground waterways, they reached the town in a few minutes, whereupon Arnold stopped them.

“That’s probably far enough. You can uncover your head.”

Rishe flinched, peering up at Arnold from under her hood, trying to show as little of her face as possible.

Arnold was dressed in a blue ensemble a tad simpler than his usual, with a high collar to hide his neck. It was made to resemble the garb of a common citizen, though the stitching and fabric were still very fine. Some nondescript golden embroidery accented it here and there; someone with a discerning eye could detect the quality. Over top, he wore a thin black robe that covered his mouth, and the goggles that hung from his neck were common among travelers for keeping the wind and sun out of one’s eyes. In a pinch, he could use them to hide his face, but he probably intended to just let them hang there. Rishe was aware that few commoners knew the faces of the royal family—it was probably fine.

I know I can lower my hood, but... Rishe hesitated, holding her robe closed.

The prince cocked a brow. “What’s wrong?” When she continued to fluster, he said, “You don’t need to be so nervous. No regular citizens would recognize our faces. We’re not headed anywhere strange either—and even if they realize it was us later, it won’t matter.”

“I-I suppose you’re right.”

“Plus, if you’re hiding so fervently, you’ll just make people more suspicious.”

He was right. Rishe made up her mind and removed her hands from her robe, lowering her hood. She steeled herself and looked up at Arnold. When their eyes met, his held a hint of surprise.

Hidden under her white robe was a layered blue dress she'd borrowed from Diana. It was a popular early summer garment among the women of the castle town. From the waist down, it resembled a flower bud—a cute, simple design.

Her coral-red hair was braided loosely to the right, adorned with smaller braids here and there. A relatively common hairstyle, but Elsie had braided ribbons in as well. True to her word, the maid had rendered her into a girl you'd meet in town, while taking special care to make sure she looked stylish *and* adorable.

Now that her look was laid bare for Arnold to see, Rishe flushed pink. *Sure, I'll blend in, but still!* She couldn't help feeling anxious. Rishe was fond of fashion herself, and she put plenty of effort into her dress and hair when she attended parties and the like, but today was about business.

Arnold had barely opened his mouth when Rishe cut him off. "No! I know what you're going to say! I'm aware we're here to work, but if my clothes were *too* modest, I'd stand out in the opposite direction, so —!"

"I thought for sure you'd come in a hemp dress and simple robe."

"Am I really so predictable?" While Rishe was reeling from the shock of being so violently seen, Arnold gave her a once-over.

"This is the work of your maids, eh?"

"Ugh..."

"You seem to be laboring under a misunderstanding. These clothes will work just fine."

"Really?" Relief washed over her.

"I'll have to thank your maids myself," Arnold said.

Rishe blinked. She didn't know what he meant, and he didn't elaborate.

"Let's get going. At this rate, we'll start attracting attention for an entirely different reason."

"Huh? Hey, wait up!" Rishe rushed to keep up with him. They

walked together for a time, with Rishe slowly getting used to the nagging feeling of embarrassment. Soon she felt able to strike up a more cheerful conversation.

“This is the perfect season for an outing, isn’t it? It’s nice and warm, but the breeze is cool.”

“Sure.”

“Right! And the air is very clean—maybe because it rained last night. Now that I get another look at it, it’s really a very beautiful town, isn’t it?” Rishe smiled sunnily, gazing at the scenery.

Galkhein’s castle town was a storied capital city. Its grand brick buildings stood stately and beautiful, with newer structures skillfully integrated into the old. Rishe’s dress billowed in the gentle late spring breeze. “The view from the castle is nice, but it’s fun to actually walk through it.”

“You speak as if this is your first time down here.”

“I-It was dark the last time I came!” Rishe blustered at the allusion to the night she’d snuck out of the palace. Although she couldn’t see his face as she walked behind him, he was surely scowling.

Even during this exchange, Arnold didn’t mention where they were going. The streets around them were growing busier; perhaps they were headed for the capital center. The crowd’s chatter rose up ahead. When she saw what they were headed for, Rishe let out an astonished, “Wow!”

They had arrived at a huge, crowded street dotted on both sides with stalls. The stalls held all manner of things for sale, from smoked meat and fish to spices in pretty bottles. A vendor of exotic lamps faced someone selling finely crafted silverware.

Hawkers’ shouts carried through the streets as shoppers happily perused the wares. The scents of fragrant crates of fruits carried all the way to where Rishe and Arnold stood. She loved seeing streets like this, so full of joy.

Her eyes sparkled despite herself. “A market!”

Arnold—who was set to walk straight past it—hesitated. “It’s just a street market... Maybe a large one. Rather ordinary, isn’t it?”

“Nonsense! Take that stand, for instance. The merchant is carrying textiles from Jubel! The cloth has religious significance to them, so it’s

terribly difficult to get export permits to other continents!” Galkhein was probably the only place you could expect to find such a thing outside of its country of origin.

Bursting with excitement, she went on, “Those are Coquiltó’s famous grapes, and *those* are rare eggs from a saloof bird! Ahh! Now that I get a better look, they don’t just have eggs—there’s a hen in that birdcage too!”

“...”

“The jewelry over there is handmade in Galkhein, right? The fine craftsmanship makes it hugely popular among women in other countries. The lamp merchants right next door come from Halil Rasha in the desert, I believe. When a country is prospering, merchants gather there. It’s a bit of a long journey, though.”

“...”

“I’m curious about that stand over there too. I can’t see it very well through the crowd, but do you suppose they come from Coyoll—”

“Rishe.”

“Eep!” Rishe snapped back to reality to find Arnold’s eyes boring into her. She realized how much she’d been rambling.

Oh no, I sound just like a merchant! I couldn’t help myself, though... I finally made it to a Galkhein market!

Rishe cleared her throat. “Th-they say you can tell a lot about a place from its market. It’s a window into the economic situation, for starters, but also the state of public security.”

“...I see.”

“For example, I can’t see any obvious bodyguards or overly cautious knights here. That’s proof of the market’s security, since there’s no emphasis on crime prevention! Travelers will feel safe to stay longer and spend more money in a town like this! Right? Observing a town’s market is...important, you see...”

“Mm-hmm.”

Her excuses weren’t going over well. Changing tack, she opted to apologize instead.

“I’m sorry. I was so excited, I got carried away.” Rishe bowed her head as Arnold took out a pocket watch. “I apologize if I made us late.

Let's get going. I'll follow your instructions, so don't hesitate to... Umm, Your Highness?"

Arnold returned the watch to his pocket and began walking, startling Rische when he turned toward the market.

"You're not going *there*, are you...?"

"We've got plenty of time. If you're that excited about it, we can't just pass by."

Rische felt a surge of happiness, everything suddenly brighter. "Thank you!"

Thus, the two of them set off into the imperial capital's market. Rische's heart soared as they mixed with the crowds, the colorful tarp roofs of the stands beautiful under the blue sky.

"Fresh berries here! Try one! They're a beautiful color, aren't they?"

"The stuff I got here is all Coyolles specialties, on sale today only! Our ship came in to Ceutena a week ago. Miss this chance, and who knows when you'll get another one!"

"Aah!"

Rische was enjoying herself so much that the delight spilled from her lips in squeaks and gasps. The merchants were animated, and the customers chatted avidly as they shopped. Just being in this vibrant space gave Rische energy.

"Look at that! Over th—"

When Rische stopped short, Arnold looked at her with curiosity. "What is it?" He couldn't possibly have guessed what was bothering her.

"Don't worry, it's nothing."

"Hrm? Well, whatever. Just don't stop in the middle of the road—we'll get separated. Worst-case scenario, I'll have to put a leash on you."

"Aha ha ha. Good joke! You almost had me fooled."

"..."

"I-It is a joke, right?!" Rische fought to compose herself, tugging at Arnold's sleeve. "Anyway, check out that fruit vendor. They seem to be from Coyolles—I want to take a look."

She walked to a stall a few meters away and picked the most

succulent fruit from the bunch. As she paid, she asked the well-built woman running the stand to slice up her purchase. The woman nodded, peeling the large, oval-shaped fruit's hard skin, revealing the perfectly ripe flesh inside. Rishe returned to Arnold with the succulent pieces impaled on wooden skewers.

"Thank you for waiting for me."

"Wait. What's that unsettling red object?"

Arnold's gaze froze on the fruit. Rishe smiled, holding out one of the skewers. "It's fruit from Coyolles. I know the color is weird and it looks slimy, but it's very filling and nutritious. It's good for you," she explained, ferrying the fruit to Arnold's mouth. "Try a bite."

"Hold on. I can't get past how it looks."

"It's good for you!" Rishe repeated. Arnold's shapely eyebrows settled into a frown, doubtless catching on she hadn't mentioned anything about its taste. Eventually, he opened his mouth with great reluctance—just a little, but the vulnerability of the position was palpable.



Still frowning, Arnold chewed awkwardly. Rishe watched him until he was done.

“What do you think? It’s sweeter than it looks and, as I said, it’s very nutritious.”

“...Yeah, nutritious. It tastes nutritious.”

“My, what a sour face.”

Still, Rishe was satisfied. Arnold had a tendency toward overwork, so eating healthy food once in a while would only do him good.

Come to think of it, in my life as an apothecary, I often fed that other prince this fruit, didn't I?

The prince in her memories, sickly since childhood, had all sorts of medicine forced on him. He was a diligent person at heart, consuming without complaint things others would have rejected on sight.

I was always surprised when he drank the tinctures my master and I prescribed—they tasted so bad. But he endured it for a full year and a half and made a complete recovery.

Good medicine almost never tasted good. Arnold wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, still scowling. “So? What else do you want to look at?”

“Gosh, there’s just so much! That stand’s got—!” Rishe stopped herself and forced a smile. “Uh... The leather goods in that stall are very well made, wouldn’t you say?”

“There’s a town specializing in leathers about a two-day carriage ride away. That’s probably where they’re from.”

“I-I see!” Was her forced smile giving her away?

Did he notice? He didn't, did he? Aside from the embarrassment of her elaborate outfit, an additional problem was plaguing Rishe: Every muscle in my body is killing me!

She’d been doing her best to ignore it, but she was flagging. She could endure the ever-present dull ache but not the periodic lancing pain. They’d done lower-body conditioning in addition to running in today’s training. Yesterday, they’d only worked their upper bodies—no doubt they’d target different areas at different times. Rishe was aware of the theory that a period of rest was important for successful muscle

growth.

Fortunately, she wasn't feeling much pain in her lower body yet, but a numbness was slowly spreading through her thighs.

I can't let him catch on. If he realizes my muscles are sore, he'll want to know why. Lord Lawvine's training was impressive, though.

Lawvine, joining the day's instructors, had observed every trainee, offering them each personalized advice.

"You're very physically capable, but that makes you overconfident. Observe your surroundings carefully and think before you act."

"You utilize your strength well, which is an impressive feat, but don't let your proficiencies limit your choices. If there's a gap between your aspirations and your ability, you and I must come up with a way to bridge that distance."

Lawvine's gentle voice and his artlessly sincere way of speaking lent his words persuasive power. *It's obvious he's guiding every recruit with their futures in mind. And he's very good at giving compliments. However...*

Rishe glanced up at Arnold as he walked beside her.

Prince Arnold is going to murder Lord Lawvine. And in just three years. I have a list of things to investigate, but that incident is my top priority. No matter how skilled an instructor the count is, it's odd...

Rishe lowered her gaze and considered the strange thought she'd had yesterday. Should she investigate Arnold? He wasn't necessarily the source of the situation, however. Lawvine didn't serve Arnold—he served his father, the current emperor. As she dwelled on this, she felt a gaze settle on her.

She glanced up to find Arnold staring. They were no longer walking side by side; Rishe had fallen several steps behind.

Oh no, here comes the leash! She had to catch up before he actually put it to use. Her upper body throbbed, but she could endure.

Before she could run to meet him, Arnold went to her. "I'm still walking too fast, I see."

"Huh? No, I'm fine, I just..." She rapidly blinked her wide eyes, realizing what he'd said.

Come to think of it, Prince Arnold is walking slower than he usually

does.

Thinking about it, there was no way he hadn't seen through her. He would have noticed her odd behavior from the very beginning. He hadn't said anything, though, just casually matched her pace.

What is this warm, floaty feeling? Rishe gave a little sigh. *This Prince Arnold really is very kind. It's impossible to imagine him killing someone for something stupid just three years from now.*

"I'm fine... Thank you." Rishe smiled, and Arnold looked away.

Joining his side once more, Rishe quietly made up her mind. *I need to learn more about him.*

Armed with enough knowledge, she might be able to prevent the tragedy Emperor Arnold Hein would wreak on the future. Rishe let her gaze wander the market while she thought.

As she sidled up to various stalls, she bought fruit that actually tasted good, sampled smoked meat, and nibbled on bread. Arnold glanced at her as if wondering how hungry she could possibly be, but he accompanied her shopping without a hint of annoyance. After they'd seen most of the stands, Arnold took out his pocket watch again.

"Are we running out of time?" Rishe asked.

He put the watch away and said, "No, but we should probably get going. If we stay in one place for too long, Oliver's underlings might find us."

"Ah yes, Oliver's—wait, what?!" Rishe's eyes bulged, and she almost dropped the pastry she was eating. "Are we hiding from Oliver as well?!"

"Yes."

Rishe was astounded by his complete lack of guilt. "You say that like it's a given!"

"I'm finished with my work for the day," Arnold replied, nonchalant. "My being gone for a while won't result in a complete breakdown—things aren't poorly run. Even if something comes up, Oliver can at least buy me time."

Was that true? Arnold was usually very forthcoming with Oliver. Rishe found herself slightly worried. *Did he whisper to me yesterday because he didn't want Oliver to overhear? But if we're here for official*

duties, why wouldn't he let his attendant know?

A possibility bloomed in Rishe's mind. *What if this secret outing isn't official at all?*

In that case, what *were* they doing out here? The root of all evil smiled at Rishe's confusion with amusement. "Come on, let's go."

"R-right..."

Rishe had no idea what was going on. There was nothing she could say. She'd lost their duel, and now she was obligated to do as he asked.

Once they'd reached their apparent destination a little ways away from the market, her puzzlement only compounded. On the outskirts of the capital, at the bottom of a staircase leading to a basement of sorts, Rishe faced a door. Its singular sign asked visitors to perform the appropriate number of knocks.

"And this is...?"

"The shop's proprietress won't come to the palace even if we summon her," Arnold said. "I have to come down here myself."

"Oh, it's a store? What do they sell?"

Instead of answering, Arnold slowly knocked five times. Rishe couldn't hear it, but there must have been a response from inside. He opened the door, urging her forward with a glance.

Alert for danger, Rishe stepped inside to find a large wooden counter. The store had wooden flooring as well, with no gaudy decorations or shelves displaying products. Instead, there was a single low table and a few leather couches.

At first glance, it looks modest, but that counter is a single board of rosewood.

"I've been waiting for you, Your Highness."

A cane tapped against the floor as a small old woman with white hair emerged from the back of the store. She wore a soft smile and light makeup, and a man in his mid-twenties supported her as she hobbled along.

The old woman stood before the counter and bowed deeply. "I pray that you are well, Your Highness."

"There's no need for such formality. Please rise."

With Arnold's permission, she looked back up. Then she turned to Rishe and smiled wider. "What a beautiful young lady. It's nice to meet you. I am the proprietress of this establishment."

"Nice to meet you. My name is Rishe Irmgard Weitzner."

"This is my grandson. Come now, introduce yourself to Lady Rishe."

The man, who was still bent forward in a bow, raised his head just a bit. His face was deathly pale, his voice and shoulders shaking with apparent fear. He did everything he could to avoid looking at Arnold.

He's scared of Prince Arnold... Clearly the prince's bad reputation precedes him. The citizens of his domain heard the most frightening rumors. This man was afraid of the ruler who had committed atrocities on the battlefield and left behind mountains of corpses. Arnold was a hero who had led his country to victory, but his imposing presence naturally elicited fear.

He doesn't seem bothered by it at all, as usual. Rishe saw no emotion on Arnold's handsome face.

While Rishe was musing, the old woman smiled wryly. "I'm sorry about him. I was just scolding him for failing to authenticate an item sold at our store." It was an obvious attempt to cover for her frightened grandson. "In fact, it's quite difficult. Would you like to give it a try, Lady Rishe?"

"G-Grandmother! You cannot be so rude to His Highness's companion!"

"Bring me the box."

The man hesitated, but he followed his grandmother's instruction and headed into the back of the store. Eventually, he emerged carrying a box covered in red velvet.

"This contains one of your wares?" Rishe asked.

"Yes. Please have a look."

Rishe watched as the man opened the box on the counter in front of her. Her eyes went wide.

"We are but humble jewelers."

Inside the box were three beautiful gemstones.

"Which of these gems do you think is a counterfeit item?" the old

woman said. "Please think of this as a game. Don't worry about your answer."

"Tell her what you think, Rishe."

At Arnold's urging, Rishe peered down at the stones. The one on the right was a pale violet color, the one in the middle the light gold of honey water, and the one on the left was a deep red.

They're all so clear. Delicately cut and beautiful too.

"Well, what do you think?"

Gemstones had been a favorite of Rishe's when she was a merchant. She'd come across countless gems and learned a lot about them. Thanks to that, she could be candid. "I don't know."

The old woman nodded slowly, still smiling. "What a clear answer. Responding honestly without feigning one's knowledge is a wonderful—"

"Therefore, Ms. Proprietress..." Rishe looked the woman in the eye. "May I borrow a loupe?"

The woman reacted to Rishe's question with momentary surprise.

"A pincette and a cloth for a good measurement as well, please. And if you don't mind, could I inspect them near the window where it's brighter?"

"My, my..." the old woman murmured.

Her grandson offered Rishe the tools with trembling hands. She took them and walked to the window, holding up the pincette. Knowing it was important to control how much strength she exerted, she picked up a gem and—careful to not drop it—held it up to the light.

Looking at them like this, they are just as beautiful. But... The more she inspected them, the more she was sure that her initial impressions were correct.

"These stones are all counterfeit."

"My word!"

Seeing the shock written all over the pair's faces, Rishe knew she was right. Arnold alone was smiling, like he'd seen it coming from a mile away.

"I underestimated you, Lade Rishe. You are the first woman I've

ever known to request appraisal tools rather than simply guessing based on how the gems look.”

“I apologize for borrowing such valuable implements, but it was the bare minimum I required to accurately judge them.”

Returning the instruments to the man, Rishe recalled, *I learned this lesson in my life as a merchant. Surface beauty does not indicate authenticity.* Rishe looked off into the distance, thinking of an incident when she’d been caught selling fake gems toward the beginning of her career.

“Still, counterfeit or not, these gems truly are beautiful, Ms. Proprietress. They’re very clear and shine just like the real thing.” Rishe returned to the counter and looked down at the jewelry box once more. “I believe that a gem’s authenticity is not everything. They may be fakes, but there are plenty of people who would treasure them all the same.”

All they had was surface beauty, but Rishe was still fond of them. She couldn’t help smiling.

“You...” the old woman said to herself. A moment later, she bowed deeply to Rishe. “I am in awe once more, Lady Rishe. I truly apologize for testing the future crown princess.”

“Huh? Oh, there’s no need for that! Please rise,” Rishe said, flustered. So it *had* been a test.

Prince Arnold is watching. Is this why he brought me here? What does he want me to do, appraise jewels? He has a shop right here to do that, so that can’t be it. Maybe sales are struggling, and he wants my help? No, that doesn’t seem right either.

As Rishe deliberated, the old woman beamed at her. “My son and his wife operate on a much larger scale; this store is just my personal hobby. I gather gems from around the world and take great pleasure in selecting the clients I sell them to.” Merchants often did this sort of thing, so it made perfect sense to Rishe...until the proprietress said something unexpected. “I would absolutely love to obtain something for you, Lady Rishe.”

Hmm? Rishe wasn’t prepared for that angle. She glanced at Arnold for an explanation, but he’d moved away from the counter to sit in one of the leather chairs. He propped himself up, resting his chin in his hand and looking up at the old woman.

“Spare her your flattery. If you want her as a client, take her order.”

“Very well. I would be delighted.”

The conversation was moving along without her, so Rishe hurriedly cut in. “Umm, Prince Arnold? What exactly is going on here?”

“My, have you not heard what you’re here for, Lady Rishe?” Rishe shook her head. The old woman smiled and said, “His Highness is here to purchase the ring his bride will wear at their wedding.”

“Hwah?” A strange noise flew out of Rishe’s mouth.

Wait a second. A ring... The kind of ring you wear on your finger? Right. That had to be it. This was a jewelry store where they sold exactly that kind of ornament. *Wait, what does she mean by bride? Prince Arnold’s bride... His bride is...* Rishe’s mind churned. *That’s me!*

Rishe thought her legs would give out. She whirled on Arnold, but he just wore that same unflappable expression as always. He sat there with his chin in his hand like this was business as usual. That only made Rishe *more* confused.

Why? Seriously, why?! Are rings a part of marriage ceremonies in Galkhein too? No, that can’t be! Rings worn on your left ring finger only have meaning in my country!

The jeweler’s voice broke through her spinning thoughts.

“I haven’t had a customer in a long while now. I’m prepared to give this piece my utmost effort! I need to make a few preparations. Kindly take a seat.”

Rishe did as she was told, sitting down beside Arnold. Timidly, she asked, “Your Highness, umm, what is all this?”

“Are you still confused?”

“Of course I am! I came along with you in secret today because I promised I would fulfill any request! Why are we buying a ring?” She couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

Arnold took out his pocket watch, gazing at it as he answered simply, “My request is that you let me buy you a ring.”

“But why? Wasn’t there anything else you wanted to make me do—I mean, something I never would under ordinary circumstances—that would benefit you?”

“What, is that what you wanted? Did you want me to ask you to do something you wouldn’t like?”

“Well, no, but...!” Maybe she *did* want that. Rishe had made this bet in the first place to gain insight into Arnold’s true nature and intentions. This only gave her a new set of mysteries to ponder. “You didn’t need to waste your favor on something like this. If there’s some reason you want me to wear a ring, you could have just asked.”

“Listen, you,” Arnold began. Rishe thought she was being perfectly reasonable, but he looked exasperated. “If I just told you, ‘I want to buy you a ring, so pick something you like,’ you’d kick up a huge fuss over it.”

“Ugh.”

“I have a sneaking suspicion you don’t like people buying you things.”

There was nothing she could say to that. Arnold was exactly right; it made her uncomfortable. Hence her current upset.

“Therefore, I have no choice but to make use of opportunities like this. The gems at this store are of the highest quality. Money is no object. Pick whatever you prefer.”

“Y-Your Highness, you shouldn’t spend money without due consideration!”

Arnold had a response ready: “Rishe. Any ring you pay for here will mean an immediate transfer of funds into the castle town.”

Rishe’s shoulders twitched.

“I know you have an interest in business. I have an excess of personal funds and nowhere to spend them. My money isn’t circulating. What do you think of that?”

“W-well, I...!”

Arnold grinned, pressing on. “The proprietress here is very particular about her furnishings, as you can see. If I spend my money here, she may purchase more. In other words, my money will eventually go toward putting food on the table of merchants and skilled craftsmen.”

“Argh...”

“If there’s a gemstone you’d like from abroad, that can be

arranged. When people and things move, money moves as well. Or do you disagree?"

Th-this isn't fair!

Everything Arnold said made sense. People hoarding money without spending spelled tragedy for merchants. No one wanted royals to spend wastefully either, but if they had excess personal funds, then funneling that money to their citizens was ideal.

"Very well. I'll pick something wholeheartedly, with everything I've got!"

"Heh." Arnold snickered at her declaration.

Just then, the old woman returned from the back of the store, coming over to sit down across from them.

"All right, time to get down to business. The centerpiece of the ring is the gemstone—I took the liberty of selecting a few. There are plenty more in the back, but let's start with these, shall we?"

Smiling, the old woman showed them her prized collection. When she set down the first jewelry box, Rishe's breath caught. "How incredible!" Before her was an array of dazzlingly beautiful gemstones. It wasn't just the color, shape, and cut that caught Rishe's eye but the variety of stones themselves.

Rishe's eyes sparkled with wonder. "Is this the famous opal that's only mined every few years in eastern Halil Rasha?"

"You know of it? Ha ha ha, then you *must* take a look at this one. A beautiful pink diamond, isn't it? This aquamarine is another fine piece..."

"Wow!"

It was truly a box of gems in every sense of the word. Arnold didn't seem the least bit interested, but Rishe couldn't help her mounting excitement. The contents of the box were incredible, storied pieces worthy of the old woman's prized collection. But here, Rishe hit upon a problem.

"Oh, this is so much fun! So, Lady Rishe, has anything caught your eye yet?"

Rishe felt a rush of disappointment in the old woman's question. *That's right. I'm not acquiring these to sell them, I'm looking for a gem for*

myself.

From that perspective, this was a different task altogether. As a daughter of nobility, she'd chosen gems for herself before, but back then she'd made choices to suit her position as the fiancée of her own country's crown prince. Now her task was different.

If this is a wedding ring, then I should probably choose a diamond. Emerald would match the color of my eyes, but that's the jewel of my country's royal family. It could be seen as offensive. These gems are all so extravagant, King Zahad would love every single one of them... Augh, this is supposed to be for me!

The more she tried, the more her brain got stuck. The fact that every jewel was radiant certainly didn't help matters. She couldn't narrow down the list at all—she had no idea what to pick.

Seeing her struggling, the old woman smiled. “Lady Rishe, could I offer you a piece of advice?”

“Please do.” Rishe raised her head to find the old woman watching her with kind eyes.

As if sensing Rishe's distress, she said, “Choose your favorite gem and wear it proudly. That's enough to give a girl courage.”

Feeling nervous, Rishe swallowed hard.

“Don't think of it as a piece of jewelry befitting the crown princess but as your own personal good luck charm. That is the best way to choose treasures. Simply pick something that you like.”

Rishe considered the woman's words.

“For instance, do you have a favorite color, Lady Rishe?”

“A favorite color...?” An answer immediately leapt to Rishe's mind. She looked up at Arnold beside her, and their eyes met. He hadn't been looking at the gems on the table—he'd been looking at her.

His eyes were a beautiful blue. His brother Theodore's were similar, but Arnold's were a bit lighter; they always made Rishe think of ice. *That color is like the clear water of a frozen sea.*

She may have first noticed it when she faced off against him in her life as a knight. Or was it only in this life? She'd looked into those eyes so many times in this last month that she couldn't remember. But looking up and seeing her reflection there gave her such a strange

feeling...

“Do you have a gem that’s the same color as his eyes?” she heard herself ask.

Arnold grunted, eyebrows knitting together. Rishe fervently believed his eyes were the most beautiful color there was. But everyone around her reacted like she’d said something exceedingly strange.

Huh?

“Oh my. Oh my, oh my, oh my,” the old woman hummed.

Wait a second. Did I just say something totally crazy? The blood drained from her face, but there was no taking it back. The joy blooming on the old woman’s face made Rishe realize her blunder.

“No, umm, you’ve got the wrong idea! I’m not being weird, and there’s *certainly* no hidden meaning to it! I just like the color of Prince Arnold’s eyes, and I’m always thinking about how pretty they are—ack!”

“Oh ho ho, you’re always thinking it, are you? Very well, please wait a moment. If that is what you’d like, I believe I have something for you.”

“Wait, Ms. Proprietress!”

Despite leaning on her cane, the old woman disappeared into the back of the store with surprising speed, leaving Rishe alone with Arnold. He’d been silent for some time now, and Rishe hoped he’d stay that way. She covered her face and hung her head, refusing to look at him.

“Please forget I said all that.”

Arnold had no response.

The experience wasn’t exactly smooth, but Rishe eventually selected a jewel. The “first-class gem” the old woman brought from the back was just what Rishe was looking for. Tension lingered in the air, but Rishe slowly regained her sense of equilibrium. The old woman’s grandson said he would draw up some designs for the ring.

Leaving the store, Rishe and Arnold set off toward their next destination.

“This is a great view. The breeze is cool. Feels nice.”

They stood on top of the walls surrounding the imperial capital. Galkhein’s capital city was itself a fort, boasting fortifications several meters thick. Directly below was the main gate into the city, with carriages coming and going in an endless stream. An enjoyable sight, to be sure, but sunset drew closer with each passing moment.

“Look at that! The sun looks huge, and it’s setting right over the imperial palace!”

“Guess it is.”

“So *this* is what it looks like from outside...” Normally, Rishe gazed down at the town from the palace; the view from the opposite side was new to her. She didn’t think she’d ever get tired of it.

Suddenly, Arnold asked her, “Why the left ring finger?”

“Huh?”

“You specified that finger when they measured you.”

“That’s...just a tradition, I guess...”

She didn’t wish him to inquire further. Wearing wedding bands on the left ring finger was a given in her home country, but she was embarrassed to admit how quickly she’d decided upon it.

“I could ask the same of you, Your Highness. Any particular reason you wanted to buy me a ring?”

“Not really. It didn’t have to be a ring, but you work with your hands often, don’t you? Mixing medicine or doing chores... You’re always running around doing tasks.”

Now that she thought about it, whenever she worked in front of Arnold, he studied her hands with great interest.

“I like the idea of seeing a piece of jewelry I gave you on those busy little hands of yours.”

“I...” That left her flustered. How could she even respond? After a moment’s hesitation, she said, “In that case, when the ring is finished, you’ll be the first person I show it to.”

“Good.”

That short exchange took a lot out of her. With a sigh, Rishe wondered what time it was.

I'm doing fine, but I wonder about Prince Arnold. He looked at his watch so much today. We'll probably have to head back soon. No, wait.

Arnold couldn't have been worrying about returning to the palace.

If so, he would have been checking the time more and more the later it became. But His Highness hasn't looked at his watch once since we arrived at the main gate.

So, he was no longer concerned about the time.

But he checked it constantly in the market and the jeweler's shop. Maybe...

Something had been bothering Rishe for the last few days. She took a deep breath and pasted a smile on her face. "Come to think of it, I've heard the maids gossiping about Lord Lawvine's arrival at the imperial palace."

"Yeah. He'll be staying for a brief period and assisting with the knight cadets' instruction."

"Is that right? He's a very distinguished individual, and I'd like to pay my respects to him if possible. Whose guest is he, precisely?"

"Mine. Lawvine specializes in training inexperienced fighters."

"Your Highness." Rishe stopped smiling and locked eyes with Arnold. "Who are we waiting for up here?"

Arnold stared back at her, nonplussed. "That came out of nowhere."

"No, I've been thinking about it ever since I learned Lord Lawvine was here."

"Oh?"

"He lords over the northernmost territory of Galkhein—beside the sea, is it not? A crucial area to shore up against any foreign invasion. But no other nations could make a move so long as the brave general Lord Lawvine is there." Lawvine's presence served as a bulwark against potential enemies. They were in a time of peace, but just a few years ago, the whole world had been at war. It was too soon for any nation to relax. "And yet...the count has left his territory and traveled the long distance down to the capital. It strains credulity to imagine he would

come all this way simply to train some new recruits.”

This was what had been nagging at her—first when she met Lawvine and learned he would be assisting with their instruction, and again when she’d recalled today’s training in the market. Maybe the truth was connected to Arnold’s incessant watch-checking.

For Arnold’s part, he just smiled, as if he was enjoying Rishe’s speculation. His expression made it clear he wouldn’t hide anything, but he wasn’t going to explain it either. “What would you say if I told you there was no deeper meaning? That I simply wanted to meet the man face-to-face? A ruler must meet his vassal in person occasionally, if only to foster deeper loyalty.”

“I would accept that explanation if you weren’t getting married soon. If you simply wanted to see him in person, two months hence would have been a perfect opportunity, no?” She also would’ve found it more believable if someone *else* had summoned Lawvine, but the Arnold whom Rishe knew would never leave a crucial region unguarded for no reason.

“Why do you think I’m waiting for someone?”

“Because this is the perfect vantage point to see into the town and survey any incoming visitors.”

Arnold hadn’t checked the time since they’d arrived at the gate. In other words, if they simply waited here, his target would come to them. Doubtless the appointed moment was approaching, and his visitor would likely be arriving from outside the gates.

“Just as you surmised, training the new recruits was the public-facing reason for the count’s visit. A pretext for his presence in the capital, along with his entourage.” This was likely a reward for her correct guesses. Despite his exposed intentions, Arnold seemed amused by their exchange. “The other day, I received a letter from a foreign royal. He sent his regrets that he couldn’t attend my wedding, but he wished to arrive early to offer his congratulations. Naturally, I sent a response telling him not to trouble himself.”

It sounded like a typical exchange of pleasantries. “Well, we can talk about how you neglected to mention any of this to me later,” Rishe said. “How did he respond?”

“I got another letter before I even posted my reply. ‘I’d like to congratulate you as soon as possible—I’m heading to you before

receiving your response.”

“He forced your hand before you could turn him away.” That sounded like trouble. “And who exactly sent you this letter?”

“You’ve got an idea, don’t you?”

She did. She’d had one ever since learning Arnold had summoned Lord Lawvine, protector of northern Galkhein.

“Right after I got the letter, I sent a scout up to the northern port town of Ceutena. A week ago, that scout reported the arrival of a ship. Considering the time it would take for a carriage to make it that distance, with a few stops at inns along the way, I calculated that he’d arrive right about now.”

In the market, one of the merchants had mentioned a product arriving in Ceutena aboard a ship a week ago that had just made it to the capital. Arnold was right; goods from the port had just arrived this morning. Wagons carrying food would have been expedited, but a royal entourage would have a slower journey. This *would* be the time.

Arnold reached out and put Rishe’s hood up, likely with her distinctive hair color in mind. Rishe followed his gaze out beyond the gates to the carriage path extending into the plains. She strained her eyes, trying to see as far as she could.

The design on that carriage is from Coyolles...

A suspicious visit from Coyolles jived with Rishe’s theory—it *would* be prudent to seek advice from Lord Lawvine, who kept tabs on countries across the sea. Arnold had summoned him to keep the visiting royal in check without ruffling any diplomatic feathers. And there was only one person from Coyolles invited to their wedding ceremony.

“I want to protect this country, Weitzner.” A young man’s voice drifted through her mind. *“I’ll do anything it takes. Fortune has allowed me to live this long, and therefore I must shoulder this great task.”*

Prince Kyle...

Coming to see Arnold was the eldest prince of the snowy country of Coyolles, a sickly young man with a strong sense of responsibility. Rishe’s patient in her past life as an apothecary.

Chapter 2

THE DAY AFTER they'd confirmed Kyle's arrival in the capital city, Rishe was once again disguised as the brown-haired boy Lucius. She sat on a bench in the corner of the training grounds.

I can't breathe!

She was already sweaty, the cloth she had wrapped around her chest making all the heat settle in her torso. Although she was on break, her lack of stamina and the muscle pain had left her completely exhausted.

"You okay, Lu? Pull yourself together! Here, I'll fan you!" The recruit sitting next to her flapped a paper handout to create a little breeze.

"Thanks, Fritz... That's nice and cool. I'm fine, though—rest while you can. We have sparring after this."

"Oh, don't worry about that. It feels better when you have someone else do it, right?"

Printed on the paper Fritz was using to fan her was their midweek assessment following their first three days of training. It listed all the trainees' names along with scores from 1 to 5. Next to Lucius's name were Rishe's scores for stamina and strength, both a measly 1. Apart from Rishe, everyone had at least a 3. Fritz had a 5 in both, but he didn't seem to consider the ratings terribly important.

"We finally get to use wooden swords today, right? Ahh, I can't wait! Oh, Lord Lawvine."

Fritz and Rishe hurriedly made to rise as the count appeared, but Lawvine waved them off.

"There's no need to stand. Use your breaks to recover and maintain your stamina. Lucius Alcott, you didn't rest enough yesterday, did you?"

Rishe gulped. The count had seen right through her. *Well, what did I expect from Prince Arnold's chosen instructor?*

She'd spent all of yesterday afternoon wandering around the castle

town with Arnold. After Prince Kyle's carriage arrived, they'd followed him to confirm the inn he was staying at, and they hadn't returned to the palace until nightfall. She'd been planning to go to bed early, but she needed to tend her field and sort medicinal herbs. Ultimately, Rishe hadn't made it to bed until after her usual hour.

"I apologize for not being able to manage my condition."

"I am not criticizing you. You *will* be sparring after this, however. Speak up right away if it becomes too much for you."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

In normal knight training, pushing through the pain was seen as a way to hone the mind and body, but Galkhein seemed to favor slower, more precise training.

This is how they create a country with absurd military strength in just five years.

Lawvine's training wasn't simply slow and steady; the upcoming matches were evidence of that. On their third day of training, recruits would be tiring of the harsh, monotonous work. Sparring with wooden swords was *fun*. Not only would it spice things up, but it would also show everyone how much work they truly needed to do. The cadets would be more passionate in their training afterward.

I wonder if Prince Arnold has told Count Lawvine about Prince Kyle.

He had to know *something*, but Rishe had no idea how much information the prince had shared. Facts or strategies that Arnold may have told Lawvine and not shared with Rishe. *After all, Count Lawvine has been under Prince Arnold's command before.* It made Rishe wonder what he was like as a commander.

"Lord Lawvine, if you don't mind my asking, could you share some war stories with us new recruits? Perhaps...regarding the defense of Ceutena, Fritz's hometown?"

"Oh! I would love that!" As an Arnold fan, Fritz was all for it. "Especially anything about the prince!"

Lawvine was passionate about educating young people. He mused, "Well, let's see... In the defense of Ceutena, Galkhein's forces numbered seven thousand. We faced fifteen thousand enemies attacking by ship."

"Wow... They had double our forces, then."

“The difference in our numbers was even more dramatic than that —Prince Arnold stood on the front lines with a mere three thousand troops entrusted to him by the emperor.”

“Huh?! You were already outnumbered, yet he didn’t even use all the soldiers he had?” Fritz blurted.

“The remaining four thousand were hastily trained young knights and farmers who’d had weapons shoved into their hands. Prince Arnold saved them for low-risk diversion missions, evacuating the citizenry, and logistics. He met the enemy with combat-ready soldiers at his side.”

“And His Highness still won.”

“That’s right. He made use of the heavy rainfall that day, utilizing the terrain of the port town as well as the enemy’s position. He overturned a massive difference in numbers with strategy, rendering our side’s casualties down to the absolute minimum.”

Fritz’s eyes shone.

“There was another battle around the same time with similar circumstances. Galkhein was victorious again, but we lost thousands of soldiers. The casualties were almost all new recruits.”

“So what you’re saying is...numbers aren’t everything in battle.”

“Indeed. It’s always *better* to have superior numbers, but hurling hordes of untrained men at the enemy is meaningless. Prince Arnold has proven this in real time.” Lawvine’s voice dropped slightly. “His Highness spares not a thought for the weak. He would never let a weak person onto the battlefield just for a chance at military achievement. However, this policy also ensures the fewest losses.”

Rishe lowered her eyes, thinking. Arnold didn’t send the weak into battle. What he wanted was an army with nothing but extremely powerful knights.

Is he strengthening the country to make war on the rest of the world in the future?

“The world is peaceful now, but the lives lost during the conflict are gone for good.” Lawvine smiled softly. It was an awkward expression, but kind. “Many young people were killed. I feel a measure of responsibility.”

Oh! Rishe had heard that line spoken somewhere before.

"Many young men around my age lost their lives in the war. And I couldn't even stand near the battlefield."

She could still remember it clearly to this day. In her life as an apothecary, Rishe had said, *"Prince Kyle, do you remember what my master told you? Staying alive is a royal's most important duty."*

"I just can't agree when it means sacrificing my own people."

Rishe felt her gaze moving toward the palace.

"Your break will be over soon," Lawvine was saying. "Try to get some rest before then."

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much." Rishe and Fritz sketched a bow as Lawvine left to speak with some of the other cadets.

"They really are incredible, huh? Both Prince Arnold and Lord Lawvine."

Rishe nodded and said simply, "They are."

She had much to think about and so much to do. She was growing impatient, but she knew she had to take things one at a time. *And for that, I'll need stamina. Training comes first!*

As she was lighting the flame of her motivation, several other cadets walked past.

"Yo, Lucius. Lord Lawvine really seems to like you despite you scoring all ones in the assessment, huh?"

"...Sven."

The smirking Sven was a particularly talented recruit. According to the scores, his stamina was a 4 and his strength was a 5. "It's nice that he spends so much extra time helping people with no talent. I envy you."

"Hey, Sven. I told you to leave Lucius alone."

"That's so nice of you, Fritz. We're *all* just trying to be nice here, you know?" Sven and his friends grinned down mockingly at Rishe. "Kids from the slums might not be aware, but this country's knight corps works on the merit system."

"Right," Sven's friend added. "Hey, Last Place. It doesn't matter how hard you work. You should find a new job. Training is a waste of time for someone like you."

Typical. That was the extent of Rishe's feelings on the matter, but Fritz appeared to feel differently. His usual sunny smile had been replaced with an angry scowl. "Knock it off, Sven. Lu is taking his training seriously. Don't mock another person's hard work."

"Hah! You seem confused. We're not here to make friends." In contrast to Fritz's sober anger, Sven shrugged, sneering. "But you always get so angry when we laugh at Lucius. If you really want to be a knight, don't you think you should have the guts to climb your way to the top no matter how many people you have to step on to do it?"

"Fritz, have you been standing up for me?"

"It's not a big deal. I just can't stand people badmouthing my friends."

Rishe let out a little breath at Fritz's bold declaration. Break was nearly over; it was almost time for their spar. The matches were round-robin—Rishe would be crossing blades with each one of them.

I hope they don't pick on Fritz just because he chose to befriend me.

"Swords down!"

The short command echoed through the training grounds. Rishe and Sven had faced off, and their bout had just been called. It hadn't even taken ten seconds.

"Thank you for the match," Rishe told Sven, pointing her sword down at him. He was sitting on the ground, his face pale and mouth flapping as the blade stopped just short of grazing his nose.

The training grounds were dead silent. Lawvine was probably the only one not completely blank with shock.

"What the... How did you...?" Sven choked out.

Rishe extended her hand. "Can you stand, Sven?"

"This is impossible! You don't have any stamina at all! Or strength!"

"Which is why I didn't use either to take you down."

The spectating trainees were utterly stumped. Sven shook his

head, unable to stand their gazes. “How? How could I lose to you?!”

“I’m sorry if I scared you, but it’s important to me not to cause Fritz any trouble.” Rishe knelt and looked Sven in the eye. “Personally, I’d like us all to be friends.”

“Agh!” Sven shot up.

Rishe hadn’t meant to be aggressive but had evidently upset him. She watched Sven scurry back to his companions, then backed away herself.

Fritz ran up to her, his eyes sparkling. “Lu! You were amazing, just like I thought you’d be!”

“Looks like I have been making things harder for you. I’m sorry about that.” Rishe lowered her head apologetically.

He stared at her. “Why are you apologizing? Anything I did, I did because I wanted to. Now you’re making me feel like *I* should apologize to *you*.”

“I didn’t do this for you. It was a good lesson for Sven—if he gets into the habit of underestimating his enemies, he’ll end up dead.”

Fritz’s eyes went wide.

“Plus, now I know that Sven has incredible reflexes. It *would* be a bit of a waste if Lord Lawvine didn’t pay him more attention.”

Their training period was only ten days long, making every moment of personalized coaching crucial. Rishe was considering all this with deep sincerity as Fritz grinned at her. “You know, you’re pretty weird, Lu.”

“Oh yeah, and about the way you call me ‘Lu’...”

“Oh! I thought it was a good nickname. Y’know, short for Lucius. Should I stop?”

Rishe shook her head. She’d had the same nickname in her life as a knight; it was very nostalgic. “No, I like it. Thanks, Fritz.” When she smiled at Fritz, he clutched at his chest. “What’s wrong?”

Is he unwell? It didn’t seem like it.

“Nothing, it’s just... Um, I dunno...” Fritz cleared his throat. “Er... Oh, that’s right! We were gonna go eat in town after training today. But I guess you’ve got work, huh?”

“Yeah... I have a pretty important job to do after this.”

In the afternoon, Rishe shed her disguise, took a bath, and dressed to the nines. She put up her wavy coral hair halfway for a tidy look and donned a dress the color of soft moonlight. She wore pearl earrings and painted her fingernails light pink. Then she accompanied Arnold—who wore a cape and white gloves with his usual military uniform—to a reception room.

As they strode through the palace, Rishe whispered, “His Highness Prince Kyle greeted His and Her Majesty this morning, correct? Did anything strange happen?”

Arnold looked extremely irritated. “My father apparently granted Coyolles’s prince permission to stay here for as long as he likes. Though I have no idea how long someone who can’t attend my wedding for *undisclosed reasons* would wish to remain.”

Rishe pulled a taut smile at his prickly response. Arnold was right to be annoyed; Kyle was breaking social etiquette.

That’s what I find so strange about this, though.

Kyle was diligent and courteous. Rishe knew that better than most.

“Your Highness, thank you for drawing up those notes on your condition after you took the medicine.”

This had happened during her life as an apothecary—right after she’d taken over caring for Kyle from her master. With his official duties over for the day, Kyle had continued to shut himself in his study, running a pen across paper.

“I beg of you, please rest. If you collapse, this will all be for nothing.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not pushing myself, Weitzner.” The prince, who called her by her last name, had spoken as he formed each letter on the page with care. *“I understand the pains you and your master have taken to develop this new medicine. I wish to help in any way I can. I can’t cut corners.”*

“I think my master forgot all about those pains the moment we perfected the medicine. And if she hasn’t, she surely will when you make a complete recovery, Your Highness.”

Rishe's comment had been somewhat flippant, but Kyle had given her a solemn look and said, "I'll do my best."

He always interacted with me sincerely and politely when I met him in my other lives too. At the very least, he's not the type to barge in on someone without considering the circumstances of the people putting him up...

As she mulled it over, they arrived at the reception room. The knights on guard opened the door, and she stepped inside with Arnold.

Arnold would sit first, but Rishe couldn't follow suit. She may have been engaged to him, but as they were not yet married, her position was merely that of a duke's daughter from Hermity. As such, she was not permitted to sit in on a meeting between a crown prince and a foreign royal. Until the two men were finished with their greetings, she would wait in the corner of the room.

"His Highness, Prince of Coyolles, Kyle Morgan Cleverly."

Rishe fell into a bow. She would not rise until Arnold and Kyle had finished greeting each other and thus could only hear them.

"Congratulations on your engagement, Prince Arnold. I, Kyle Morgan Cleverly, have come from Coyolles in place of my father the king to wish you a blessed union."

"I sincerely appreciate you making the long journey. Your country's blessing will ensure a bright future for my own nation."

As the eldest princes of their respective countries, the two of them should have been on equal footing—but the way they spoke suggested otherwise. Coyolles was small fry compared to Galkhein.

The difference in their standings is obvious even with Coyolles's wealth of gem and gold deposits, Rishe thought. The problem was their other resources. The country is covered in snow all winter, which makes procurement and transportation of food difficult. They burn through firewood rapidly. They can't produce enough food and fuel for their country on their own.

They had wealth, but that just made them a juicier target for more powerful kingdoms. Their tenuous position was maintained with vigorous diplomacy and political marriages. Coyolles could absolutely not afford to make an enemy out of the militant Galkhein across the sea.

Five years from now, Coyolles will stand with the rest of the world against Galkhein...and fall to invasion.

Coyolles's central issues were the fragility of both its military and its heir Prince Kyle. The fact of Kyle himself braving a harsh journey by ship to come here spoke volumes.

Eventually, the exchange of greetings came to an end, and Rishe sensed Arnold looking her way. "Rishe."

"Yes, Your Highness." Rishe raised her head. She paced over to Arnold—who hadn't yet sat down—and stood at his side.

"This is Rishe, my future bride. We appreciate you coming to congratulate us."

"I'm very pleased to meet you."

Rishe looked at Kyle head-on. His skin was white as porcelain and his hair was silver, almost illuminating his expression as it framed his face. His eyes were a light blue, a levity to them that belied his strong will. They were like the clear surface of a lake.

He really is like an ice spirit. She recalled the way the girls in his own country would blush when speaking of him.

"My name is Rishe Irmgard Weitzner. I'm honored to make Your Highness's acquaintance."

"I am Kyle Morgan Cleverly." Kyle knelt fluidly before Rishe. It was a perfect display, as if he were a knight instead of a prince. His eyes lowered, and the light shone through his eyelashes as if they were sculpted from ice. While down on his knee, Kyle spoke without a hint of self-consciousness. "Your beauty is like that of a goddess."

Goodness me...

Looking up at her with an earnest gaze, Kyle went on, "I'm delighted to meet you. I pray you forgive my rudeness at daring to speak in your divine presence. I had assumed that His Highness Prince Arnold's fiancée would be beautiful, but how was I to imagine a woman of such exquisite grace?"

O-ohh... That's right.

"All the gold my country boasts could not possibly compare to your radiance, Lady Rishe. Even flowers in bloom would be ashamed of the poor display they make against your splendor."

Forcing a straight face, Rishe recalled an important aspect of Coyolles culture: Men practically *worshipped* women. This etiquette was

pushed from their youth. If a man spotted a woman in Coyolles trying to walk down a muddy path, he would drop whatever he was doing and escort her to her destination in a gentlemanly manner. The higher the status of a man in Coyolles, the more he practiced this behavior.

I'd heard it was all for the harmony of the household. They spend long winters trapped in close quarters, but...wow.

As this was merely the custom, Kyle had no ulterior motives for complimenting her in such a way. However, as a man known for his diligence, he delivered these compliments with such fervent sincerity that he'd largely convinced ladies on the other end he meant every word.

"I hardly deserve such praise, Your Highness." Rishe smiled and let the compliments go in one ear and out the other. She had other things to focus on.

Prince Kyle is so pale! Her heart sank as she looked down at the man kneeling before her. I mean, he's always pale, but now he's almost blue. His index nail is cracked all the way to the skin. Even his inner eyelids have a ghastly pallor! His posture is lacking, and his voice is quieter than usual as well.

She quickly calculated the nutrients and medicines necessary to treat the prince's current condition. During all this, Kyle continued to extol her.

"Your bride is beautiful down to her very fingertips. It's as if she's dripping with gems."

"Oh!" Rishe exclaimed. "Thank you! We'll be manufacturing this nail polish here in Galkhein in the future. I hope it makes it to Coyolles as well! Say, Prince Arnol—"

"..."

Rishe glanced at her fiancé and was shocked by the ice in his eyes as he looked down at Kyle.

Huh?! Did I miss something?

The look on Arnold's face was so cold it could have sent a bystander running in fright. There had to have been some crucial clue in Kyle and Rishe's conversation just now.

Before Kyle noticed, she reached out and tugged on Arnold's sleeve. "Your Highness..."

“Yes?” His expression softened somewhat, and he addressed Kyle once more. “That’s enough pleasantries. Please, sit. Relax. Make yourself at home.”

“I graciously accept. Lady Rishe, please do excuse any impropriety on my part in the face of a divine beauty such as yourself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. For that matter, I am not yet a member of the royal family. Do not feel you have to treat me with any overabundance of courtesy.”

After that, they were finally able to sit and chat. When the conversation began in earnest, Arnold displayed the usual surliness without a hint of his earlier chill. They spoke for a good half an hour without Kyle’s intentions becoming any clearer.

“We’ll have a servant escort you to your room. I do hope you recover fast from your exhausting journey here.”

“I appreciate your concern. I’m thankful for the opportunity to rest.”

Rishe and Arnold stayed behind after Kyle left the room. Rishe leaned back in her seat and took a deep breath, tired after the tumultuous downpour of social pleasantries. Being alone with Arnold helped her regain some of her equilibrium—although this comfort struck her as odd.

“Did you learn anything from that, Prince Arnold?”

“Not at all. He only brought up safe subjects. I have no idea what he’s doing here.”

“Huh? Then why were you looking at him like you were trying to murder him with your eyes?”

Arnold brought a hand to his chin, completely indifferent to Rishe’s surprise. “More importantly, it seems Kyle’s brought a couple of scholars with him from Coyolles. There will be an information exchange between them and some of our own. Would you like to attend?”

Rishe perked up at the unexpected opportunity. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“We’re entertaining him, so we might as well get something out of it.”

“He is here to congratulate us, at least ostensibly. I’d like to be

there, though. Oh, and I've heard that His Highness is sickly. I have some medicine for him to try." She hadn't expected to see him now, but Kyle *had* been invited to their wedding. Rishe had the cure to his illness prepared to give to him whenever he was here. She knew all the medicinal herbs required for his recovery by heart. "If the scholars from Coyolles can verify my methods, then I won't have to sneak it into his food."

"...What?"

"Well, if I just handed him some medicine, would he take it? He'd be suspicious."

In her non-apothecary lives, Rishe had sent anonymous letters informing her former master of the medicine that would cure Kyle. The ambitious woman would do anything in the name of research, so despite how suspicious Rishe's letters had been, she had followed the instructions regardless.

"I'd like him to start taking the medicine sooner rather than later—adding it to his food just seemed expedient."

Arnold frowned.

"Just...kidding?"

"That doesn't sound like a joke, coming from you." Arnold had said something very similar once before. In truth, she was half-serious, but she decided to stay quiet about that.

"In any case, brace for the next annoyance tomorrow. We're holding a welcome party for Kyle. As much as I would love to skip it, we'll have to attend."

"Right. I'll be ready."

"The best way to let Kyle and Lawvine meet naturally will be at the party. I'm sure Kyle will catch on to our warning and handle it diplomatically... Hey, what's with that look?"

Arnold frowned, seeing Rishe stiffen with surprise. But her promise to Theodore left her unable to reveal her inner turmoil.

If Lord Lawvine comes to the party... It was perfectly reasonable for him to come, but Rishe still broke out into a cold sweat. The count's attendance would make interacting with him unavoidable.

He'll find out that I'm Lucius!

That night, Rishe headed for her field with her guards in tow, as always. She wore a deep blue dress that was easy to wash and didn't show stains, her long hair tied up in a ponytail. As she silently harvested her medicinal herbs, she considered her newest worry.

If I meet Lord Lawvine at the party, he'll expose "Lucius's" identity. I knew I'd need to make an apology after the training period is over, but I'd hoped to keep it a secret until then.

Rishe wanted to learn about Galkhein's knights; she wasn't participating in the training just to toughen up and build stamina.

This will help me get closer to understanding just what Emperor Arnold Hein plans to achieve in five years' time...

With a sigh, she thinned out the sprouts budding in her field and steeled herself for what she needed to do.

I have to welcome Kyle, fool the count, and avoid stoking Arnold's suspicions. I'll use a proven technique at the party. It's tiring, but the lessons I learned in my fifth life will come in handy!

She dusted the dirt from her hands and stood, basket in hand. A night breeze caressed her cheek. Spring on this continent ended with a brief rainy season—the wind tonight was a pleasant precursor. The fireflies would come out soon. Maybe she could find a place on the palace grounds to watch them.

While she was considering this, several lights flickered to life in a distant tower. She'd never seen it lit up before.

One of the knights followed Rishe's gaze and said, "The scholars from Coyolles are staying in that tower."

"Oh, that's where they are?" Rishe was acquainted with a few of them—although in this life, it was only one-sided.

I wonder if Gideon is here. Greg hates traveling by ship, so I assume he stayed in Coyolles. As she recalled the familiar faces, her mind lingered on one in particular. *This should be the era when Master is traveling all over to seek out books of medicine.*

In her life as an apothecary, she'd met her master around a year

and a half from the current moment. Rishe had caught her eye as someone whose knowledge of medicine was self-taught, and the woman had bestowed even more upon her. Rishe was with her for two years, but there was still so much she could have learned.

I'm sure Master's not with the group from Coyolles, but...if I could see her again, there's a lot I'd like to ask her. And not just about Kyle; she wanted to make other medicines in the future. Her problem was her low supply of medicinal herbs. She had asked the Aria Trading Company to procure what they could, but some would be hard to get outside of Renhua, the medicinal capital of the world.

Still, Prince Kyle is my priority right now. I'll have to convince his scholars to let him try my medicine for at least a few days. The difficulty lay in how absolutely terrible it tasted: The concoction was bad enough that it would be hard to convince them it wasn't poisonous.

I must get it into him, though. If I don't, he won't even be able to stand up five years from now.

She had crossed paths with Kyle in her first life as a merchant. She'd traded in gems, giving her an opportunity to do business with the king of Coyolles. Kyle found working with Rishe convenient, and they continued to make deals, but his condition only worsened with time. Within half a decade, Coyolles gave up on its first prince and named its second prince—only five years old at the time—the king's successor.

Come to think of it, Prince Kyle's half brother will be born this year. I think his birthday is in the seventh month, like mine, so...next month. In Coyolles, the kind third queen was likely enthusiastically preparing to have her first child.

Rishe remembered how Kyle had spoken to her, voice hoarse, unable to even sit up in bed. *"I have no interest in ascending to the throne. There's no point. My only fear is my inability to repay my country and the people who have respected me as their prince for so long."*

I must ensure Prince Kyle recovers. Rishe knelt in the corner of her field, picking herbs for Kyle's treatment. *I wonder if Kyle ever visited Galkhein around this time in any of my previous lives. Has it happened in all of them? Or is this a first?*

Kyle was here to celebrate Arnold and Rishe's engagement. *This is a departure from my previous lives, and it means everything's going a little differently.* If that held true, she had hope. *There's meaning in my*

decisions. I'm reordering things. Okay, I'm even more motivated now!

She wanted to change the world, to squeeze out even one more second of life than her last. Her ultimate goal was to sleep a solid ten hours every night, read books in the morning shade, and enjoy tea in the afternoon. She imagined the bliss of reclining in a hammock on her balcony at night, eating fresh fruit while her hair dried from the bath.

As she was indulging in her fantasies, one of the knights called out to her, "Lady Rishe, step back, please." His voice was laced with tension.

Rishe caught on at the same time.

"...I'm surprised," came a man's soft voice.

Recognizing it, Rishe felt herself rising to her feet. The speaker stood in the shadow of a nearby building. She couldn't see his face, but she *could* make out his white robe and the armband marking him as a citizen of Coyolles. That was the only reason her guards hadn't drawn their swords.

"I figured the person tending this field would be in a profession like mine. To think it would be a noblewoman important enough for a two-knight watch."

"You're..."

The man ambled over to Rishe. When the moonlight illuminated his face, Rishe gasped.

He tucked his long blond hair behind one ear with graceful fingers, his robe undone far enough to dance in the breeze. When he smiled, his beautiful, almost feminine features made it difficult to guess his age.

There's no way he's here with Prince Kyle right now. There's no grounds for it! I have no idea how he spent his days before I met him, but—!

The man held a lit herbal cigarette between his fingers, thin and fragrant, containing none of the toxins of a cigar. It just spread a sweet, flowery scent around him. Rishe knew that smell well. She'd learned it a long time ago at this man's side.

"Good evening, my assumed colleague. What, precisely, are you planning to do with those herbs?"

Professor...

The man Rishe had once called her teacher, Michel Hévin, stood before her eyes.

“Mankind’s creations must be put to proper use.”

The last time Rishe met this man was on a moonlit night just like this one.

“I broadly agree with you, but that aphorism is imperfect. No one can agree on what ‘proper’ means.” The genius Michel Hévin had said those words with the same flowery herbal scent drifting around him.

“If I use this chemical I’ve created, the world will surely be thrown into turmoil. But what’s wrong with that?” Michel had smiled softly, tucking his light blond hair behind one ear. *“Is it wrong to want to live to see the changes your work has wrought?”*

“...Professor.”

His violet eyes focused on Rishe. It was a lonely look, but he still smiled as he said, *“Farewell, my student. I hope your life is a ‘proper’ one in your own mind.”*

That was the last time she’d seen him. But now, Michel stood before her once again. Rishe was frozen with shock, and her guards stepped forward to protect her. “My apologies, sir. I can see that you’re a guest, but would you mind telling us your name?”

“Hmm? Oh! Sorry if I startled you.” Michel bowed, moving with a strange fluidity, like he didn’t have a spine. “I’m Michel Hévin. Just as you’ve surmised, I’m from Coyolles.”

“The rooms prepared for you are quite a distance from here, sir.”

“If you’ve lost your way inside the palace, we’ll summon someone to show you back to the tower.”

Rishe’s knights—usually unfailingly polite—betrayed uneasiness as they spoke to Michel.

Michel, for his part, didn’t seem bothered in the slightest. He flashed a grin. “How kind. But I’m not lost; I’m just interested in speaking to this young lady here.”

“Sir Hévin, I apologize, but Lady—”

“It’s all right,” Rishe cut in.

At once, the knights took a step back. “Very well.”

She sent a silent thank-you for their dedication in protecting her and turned to face Michel.

Running into him here is surprising. However...

For the time being, she had to greet him as if they were meeting for the first time. Besides, she had a question for him. “I am Rishe Irmgard Weitzner. Sir Hévin, might you be one of the scholars His Highness Prince Kyle brought with him to Galkhein?”

“Well, I guess you could call me a scholar. I’m mostly concerned with research, though—I don’t get out much.” Michel chuckled. “Those nails...” He pointed at Rishe’s pink polish. She’d painted her nails before meeting Kyle in hopes of eventually pushing the product in Coyolles. “Is it gelwood sap? It’s usually white, but you’ve dyed it a different color, I see.”

Rishe swallowed. *He can tell all that from just a glance?* She had designed this nail polish herself. Michel couldn’t have known of its existence before today, but he’d analyzed its components almost instantly.

“How did you harden it like that?”

“I added lish grass, gibi nectar, and lapet grass, then combined it all with glue.”

“I see. Smart,” Michel said, impressed. He glanced down at Rishe’s nails again. “Did you avoid cyril grass to prevent excess bubbles in the mixture?”

“It’s just as you say. You’re well informed.”

“Well, it’s just a theory.” Michel gave her an impish look. “Do you think there’d be any change if you used estoma sap for that?”

She thought back to their days of experimentation. *I handled estoma sap several times when I was studying with him, so yes, I do.*

Looking at him squarely, she answered, “I believe it would harden into a much stronger polish—strong enough to glue a broken tooth back together. Also, it would probably harden clear.”

“Mm. I agree.”

“But that’s just a hypothesis. I would have to verify it with experimental trials.”

Michel’s eyes went wide before he smiled softly, nodding with satisfaction. “You’re a good girl, aren’t you? You hypothesize, come up with practical applications, and value experimentation and verification of your results. I’d love to have you as a student.”

“Thank you, Lord Hévin.”

He’d said the same thing to her in one of her past lives, but unfortunately, she couldn’t give him the same response this time.

“Becoming your student would prove difficult, but...I don’t suppose you’d mind teaching me for the brief time that you’re here?”

“Sure, I don’t mind. Though I’m still learning myself. There’s plenty I don’t know.”

“Thank you very much. I shall call you ‘Professor,’ then.”

“Professor, eh? Heh heh, that’s kind of fun.”

Rishe smiled at his amusement and began to think. *The real question is what he’s doing here in Galkhein. If it’s for that chemical, then...*

Impatience swelled in her chest, but she didn’t want to pry and raise suspicions. He might simply be accompanying Kyle on the prince’s orders.

While Rishe contemplated, Michel’s gaze shifted once again to the field. “By the way, my student. Can we return to my initial question?”

“Of course. What were you asking?”

“The plants in this field appear to be of a slightly different sort than what I study. I’m no expert, and this is only a theory, but...”

Michel brought the cigarette to his lips. “You’re not planning to drug Kyle, are you?”

So much for not being an expert. He’d clocked this field instantly. One of her guards was even giving her a look of open-mouthed shock.

He wouldn’t even tell me his own specialty. He’d just say, “I’m not an expert; I don’t have perfect knowledge of all things. I can’t say I understand everything.”

Michel was the same as always. Well, not quite. She’d never met *this* Michel.

Rishe cleared her throat. "As a matter of fact, Professor, I'd love to speak about that."

This was perfect. She'd use this opportunity to put him to work for Kyle's sake.

That being said...

Some thirty minutes later, Rishe realized the situation she'd put herself in—and she was at a complete loss.

She'd arrived at a reception room in the palace, a smaller one than they'd used earlier. Along with Rishe were her guards, Michel, and Kyle, who had been summoned from his quarters.

...I didn't think I'd be going straight to Prince Kyle!

Kyle greeted Rishe politely, though he seemed supremely stumped. "Thank you for this unexpected delight, Lady Rishe. To think I would be so fortunate as to lay eyes upon you twice in one day; I'm not sure how to express the joy I feel from such a wondrous opportunity."

"Your Highness, I beg you—speak freely. Don't concern yourself with propriety."

"All right. As you wish." Looking worried, Kyle turned to Michel beside him. "Michel, what exactly are you doing?"

Michel grinned. "I found this remarkable young woman in a courtyard. She's got something interesting, and I wanted to introduce her to you right away."

"Watch what you say, will you? This is the crown prince of Galkhein's fiancée."

"Oh, really? Eh, she just became my student a minute ago, so it's fine."

Kyle gave her a bewildered look. Rishe bowed her head to him, apologetic. Due to their past, she felt responsible for Michel's behavior, as if she were a family member.

"She's an aspiring apothecary, you see. I believe she has some medicine that would benefit you, Kyle."

"An apothecary? Lady Rishe?"

"She told me she studied under a mentor from Renhua! From how she tells it, I think this mentor and I would get along well, isn't that right, Rishe?"

Rishe could only laugh in response. “Aha ha ha...”

Michel plowed on. “These aren’t herbs I’ve studied myself, but I’m aware of their potency. This medicine should work, and its side effects shouldn’t impact your daily life overmuch. I think we should experiment with them, Kyle!”

“Professor, you cannot ‘experiment’ on the prince of a nation!”

“Huh? Was that the wrong way to put it? My, common sense can be difficult, can’t it?” Feigning surprise, Michel smiled at Kyle, who had quite a complicated look on his face. “I truly do pray for your full recovery, Your Highness. With every beat of my heart.”

Ah, Professor, you can’t say it like that...

Kyle had a very earnest, sincere disposition and thus was susceptible to others’ sincerity. He believed his frail body to be a burden. “I understand.”

Aaah.

Just as she expected, Kyle nodded his head gravely. Rishe was grateful for his cooperation, but she couldn’t help her concern for him. “Are you sure, Your Highness?”

“The foremost scholar of my country urges me to try it and stands by its efficacy. I am dedicated to doing anything it takes—I consider the possibility fortuitous.” With the utmost gravity, he added, “After all, a medicine prepared by such a goddess will doubtless have some effects simply by the very nature of its creator.”

“...I’ll just get it ready, then.” Rishe took a moment to collect herself, then stood. She would have to report to Arnold before she administered any medicine, so she asked one of her guards to deliver a message to his office, where he was sure to still be working.

The guard returned with Arnold’s reply: a simple “Understood.” Apparently, his intention to allow Rishe free rein still remained. Unsure of what he was really thinking, Rishe got to work.

First: mix the medicine!

Rishe hastened back to the detached wing with her basket of herbs. She lit the kitchen stove and set the herbs she had already prepared to boil. Asking a maid to mind the pot for her, she returned to the reception room to interview her patient.

"I see..." she murmured. "You weren't eating much on your journey."

"It embarrasses me to say so, but I was seasick for much of it... I was stuck in my cabin the entire time."

"That sounds awful. How about after you arrived in Galkhein?"

"Well, then I spent the rest of the trip carriage-sick..." Kyle said dejectedly.

Michel smiled softly at his prince. "Kyle was a brilliant patient, though. He fought his nausea the whole time. I felt so bad when he threw up the fruit I gave him, but he managed to keep down water and ice. I'm not really suited for tending the sick, though..."

"Michel," Kyle said. "Could you stop patting my head?"

"You should have brought a normal apothecary with you," Michel went on, "instead of someone who doesn't know what he's doing."

Kyle frowned. "The queen is about to give birth. The royal family's supply of apothecaries is not limitless; as many as possible should remain with her, should they not? Perhaps I should have left you there as well..."

"No way. Childbirth is way out of my wheelhouse."

"You just came back covered in blood a few days ago, saying you attended the birth of a calf," Kyle protested. "Was that not for your research?"

"Nah, I'd just never seen it before. I was interested, so I got a little overexcited."

"You terrorized Coyolles Castle for that?"

The familiar banter warmed Rishe's heart. *There are moments when the professor looks younger than eighteen-year-old Prince Kyle. Of course, no one knows how old he actually is...*

The reason for that was simple: Michel himself didn't know it. He looked to be in his mid-to-late twenties, but he occasionally displayed the innocence of a much younger man and the wisdom of an older one.

"At least he was able to eat dinner tonight. He'll improve gradually," Michel said.

Kyle's face remained glum. "I feel pathetic for failing to manage my own condition. I must be stricter with myself—"

“Your Highness. It’s not discipline you lack, it’s compassion. You must value yourself more. You need to let yourself rest, take a long bath, and eat something tasty and nutritious. I request that you exercise to the best of your ability, stay positive, and practice self-love.” Rishe smiled at Kyle. “Part of being healthy is enjoying life.”

“Enjoying life...” Kyle repeated, considering the words.

Rishe nodded. “Don’t worry about the return trip. I’ll brew medicine to prevent seasickness and send it home with you. That way, you can appreciate the scenery on your journey.”

Kyle looked surprised for a moment before he bowed his head deeply. “Thank you very much, Lady Rishe.”

“Please don’t mention it.”

“While the medicine’s brewing, would you care to take a look at my writings?” Michel artlessly gestured toward a bundle of papers.

“Professor, is this...?”

“Oh, your research,” Kyle remarked. “You showed me just the other day.”

“That’s right. People keep saying I should write things down. I don’t think it’s for me, though. I keep it all up here in my head.”

“But you forget everything that isn’t directly related to research you’re interested in, right? Your notes are too complex, Michel. I’m not sure what a person who’s just met you could possibly make of—”

“Wow!” Rishe breathed as she paged through the notes.

Incredible! This is the experimental data he’d already burned when I met him! He told me he didn’t remember any of it. I was dying to see it for myself!

Michel dropped most experiments once he’d satisfied his own curiosity, but several were awfully promising—they just needed to be studied a bit more in-depth. Rishe got the feeling that if she started reading this, she wouldn’t be able to stop.

“You can understand Michel’s notes, Lady Rishe?” Kyle asked. “I’m impressed.”

“Heh. You really are an interesting girl.”

Rishe grilled Michel for close to an hour, then returned to the detached wing to check on her herbs. They had boiled down enough, so

she let them cool before transferring them to a small bottle.

She returned to the reception room and summoned Kyle, who was resting in his chambers. Thrusting the bottle into his hands, Rishe said solemnly, “This is the completed medicine. However, I must lead with one big caveat.”

Michel raised an eyebrow. “Side effects? I figured it would just make him a bit drowsy.”

“No, it’s not side effects.”

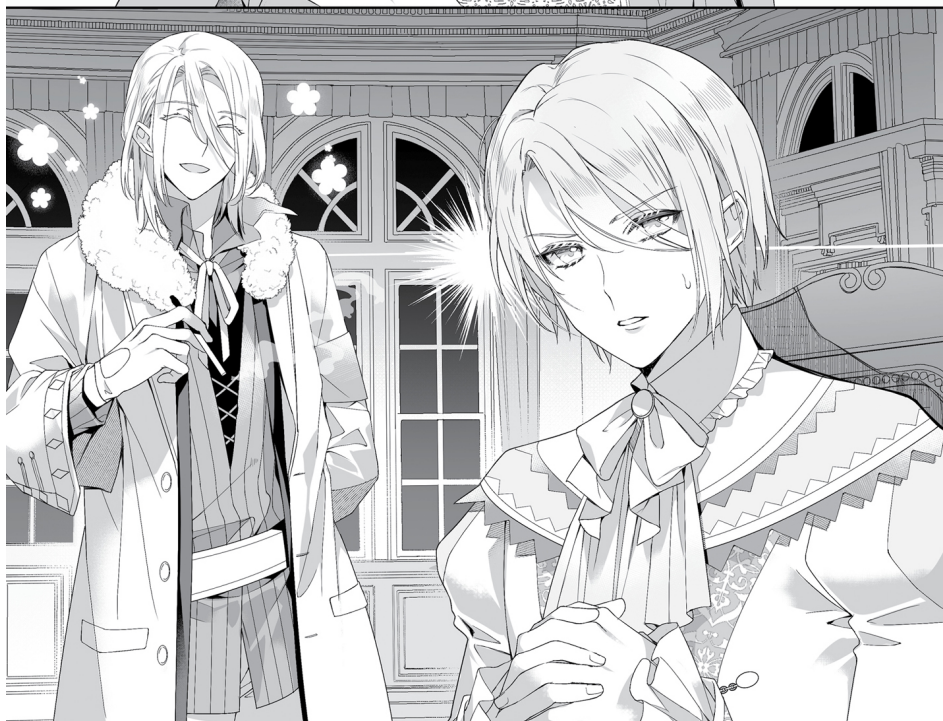
“Please tell me, Lady Rishe. I am willing to surmount any obstacle in order to overcome my illness.”

Rishe’s eyes fell, and Kyle’s expression hardened to match her. He gulped.

“This medicine tastes absolutely *awful*.”

“It tastes awful,” Kyle parroted, and Rishe nodded.

Michel broke into a smile and said, “What, is that all? Kyle can handle it. He’s a strong kid—earnest and hardworking. Right?”



“Professor, please don’t put words in his mouth!”

“No, Lady Rishe, I won’t complain. If this is what I must do, I will go to any lengths.”

“I know,” Michel said. “I’ll feed it to him. Say ‘aah’!”

“Eep! Professor, don’t! At least give him some water!”

Michel put the vial to Kyle’s lips, giving Rishe no time to stop him. Kyle, who had opened his mouth to speak, quickly found it flooded with muddy green liquid. The prince immediately covered his mouth and hung his head, going stock-still. He must have been struggling to swallow, but the longer he held it against his tongue, the more he would suffer. Rishe rushed to her feet, just as he gulped it down.

“A-are you all right?”

“I—” Kyle started, but a coughing fit cut him off. It seemed he was not all right. Still, he resolutely raised his head and squeezed out, “I’m fine. It was easier than that one time my father told me to eat dirt.”

“This medicine is liquid, you know!” Comparing the palatability of liquid medicine to something solid like dirt was madness.

“Hey, Kyle, how did it taste?” Michel asked, giddy. “Come on, tell us!”

“It’s got bitter and sour notes, and on top of that, there’s a very overpowering...*unique* smell. And there’s this strange, sticky sweetness on my tongue even after I swallowed it... Ugh...”

“Your Highness,” Rishe interjected. “We don’t need commentary. I’m sorry, could one of you knights get him some water?!”

“Why don’t you try paying a little more attention to the taste this time,” Michel said. “Here, try another swig—”

“*Professor!*” Rishe shrieked.

The reception room was thrown into chaos, but they eventually got things back under control and returned Kyle to his bed. Regardless of the medicine’s efficacy, he still needed rest. Rishe allowed the knights from Coyolles to escort him, staying back in the reception room with Michel and her own guards.

“You should return to the scholar’s tower and get some rest yourself, Professor. I’ve summoned a knight to escort you. Just give him a few minutes to arrive.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

It was already ten o'clock, and Rishe needed to head back to the detached wing to sleep as well. She had training in the morning, meaning she had to remove the polish from her nails. As she went through a mental checklist of her bedtime routine, Michel looked eagerly at the half-empty vial. He scooped a bit of medicine up with a finger and licked it. How nostalgic.

I never thought I'd see the day I'd call this man "Professor" again.

She recalled an incident in their laboratory. Michel had recently gotten hold of the ingredients for a certain chemical. The day held nothing out of the ordinary, but every time Rishe saw that chemical used, she felt a twinge in her chest. No doubt she let her unease show on her face more than once.

“You really don't like this stuff, do you, Rishe?” Michel had said when he caught her, smiling faintly. “You're a clever girl with heaps of intriguing knowledge, though I've no idea where you learned it. In fact, your one flaw as a student is your dogged insistence that your wisdom and skills must only be utilized for the betterment of others.”

The brilliant scholar's smile soured then. “I'm not sure who gave you the right to decide what betters someone's life.” He ran his fingers over the chemical's recipe. “To use an analogy: Something that was born poisonous could only truly fulfill its purpose by poisoning—by worsening a life.”

Michel didn't need the chemical. He'd burned the research notes his lord had ordered him to write. The only thing that remained was this recipe, which he'd written unprompted.

“I created this, and I want it to fulfill its purpose. Maybe this is what being a parent feels like,” Michel joked.

“I respect you, Professor, but I don't understand your position,” Rishe told him.

“What can't you understand?”

“The part about a poison's purpose.” Perhaps she should have held her tongue, but she couldn't accept what he was saying. “Can a poison really never better someone's life?” Michel was surprised by the question, but Rishe was serious. “It's not like you to decide that something came into this world just to make it worse. I mean, that's just

like—”

“You don’t need to worry so much. It’s not complete yet anyway,” Michel cut her off, still smiling. “Sure, I have the formula, but I don’t have anyone to test it on. At least, not the way I’d like.”

“What sort of person would you need?”

“Hmm? Let’s see...” Michel put a finger to his lips, his smile wide and bewitching. “I’ll keep that a secret until I find them.”

The conversation ended there. Michel had looked down, leaving the rest unsaid.

The professor and I never came to an understanding about that chemical. Eventually we parted ways, and I never saw him after that. Now that she had crossed paths with Michel on her seventh life, she couldn’t help but wonder, *Did he ever find the person he was looking for?*

A knock interrupted her reverie. A single guard stood outside, watching the hall. Sensing a new presence, Rishe assumed that the knight she’d requested to guide Michel had arrived.

“Pardon me, Lady Rishe. Your escort is here.”

Just as she thought. Rishe thanked the knight and turned to Michel. “Thank you for waiting, Professor.”

“No, Lady Rishe, it’s not Professor Hévin’s escort...”

Rishe turned, curious, and found an unexpected figure in the doorway. “Rishe, come with me.”

“Huh?”

Arnold, who would usually still be working at this hour, stood there looking handsome as always. Rishe felt her jaw go slack with surprise.

Why did Prince Arnold come to pick me up?!

The question must have been plain on her face because her guard leaned over and said, “When I requested the guard for Prince Kyle, I stopped by Prince Arnold’s office as well. He told me to call him after the medicine had been administered.”

“N-no, that’s not why I’m confu—”

“So, this is him. The scholar.” Arnold fixed his icy gaze on Michel, who was sitting on one of the reception room’s couches.

Brushing off her bewilderment, Rishe said, “This is Professor Michel Hévin from Coyolles. He’s very knowledgeable; I hope to learn as much as I can from him while he’s here.”

“Heh, I’m honored to make your acquaintance. I suppose I should be on my best behavior.” Michel rose from the couch and offered Arnold a graceful bow. His blond hair swayed with the movement. “Good evening. You must be the crown prince of this fine nation. I hear it was you who allowed us entry into your royal library. I appreciate that tremendously.”

Rishe nervously watched Michel offer his greetings. The researcher was, in general, very free in his personal relations. He didn’t much value customs or courtesy. He treated Prince Kyle and Rishe, a student, in the same fashion. She didn’t know anyone else who would dare to pat full-grown royalty on the head.

If he tries to pat Prince Arnold’s head, I’ll stop him at any cost.

She steeled herself for Arnold’s response, but his expression barely flickered. “As you’ll be sharing your knowledge with my wife, I will ensure you have everything you need. I believe our minister of foreign affairs is due to take you around the capital tomorrow, but let me know if there’s anything you require to make yourself more comfortable.”

Rishe couldn’t believe her ears.

Michel beamed at Arnold’s blank face. “How generous! Maybe I’ll take you up on that. Ask for all sorts of things.”

“Rishe, let’s go.”

“R-right. Good night, Professor.” Rishe scurried after Arnold.

On the threshold, a voice called her back. “Rishe.”

She turned to find Michel wearing a tranquil smile, just as she expected. It was the same one she’d seen so often in the past. Feeling nostalgic, Rishe smiled back.

“See you tomorrow. Think about what you want to learn, okay?”

“Yes. Thank you, Professor.”

The door slowly closed between them.

It feels like it’s been ages, Rishe thought, walking through the palace with Arnold. Their guards followed along behind them.

Arnold was the first to break the silence. “So...you believe that

man is a capable teacher?”

“The professor? Oh, very capable!” She’d taken care to speak with Michel for a while before calling Kyle to cover for the fact that she knew so much about him. Making sure not to inadvertently reference future events, Rishe explained, “There’s no one in his industry who hasn’t heard the name Michel Hévin. Considering his accomplishments, it feels presumptuous to even judge his capacity.”

“What’s a guy like that doing in Coyolles? He doesn’t seem like a local.”

She knew the reason, but it wasn’t one Michel had disclosed in their earlier conversation. She opted to make something up. “M-maybe the cuisine there suits him?” Arnold appeared to have a low opinion of Coyolles, and she wasn’t sure why. She circled back to her earlier question. “Prince Arnold, why did you suddenly show up to escort me?”

“I was on my way back. They finished up moving some of my belongings into the detached palace.”

The move was finished, then. “Which means...we’re neighbors from now on?”

“I guess so.”

Perfect! For the time being, Rishe had successfully put some physical distance between Arnold and his father. She didn’t know what precisely would lead to the altercation that resulted in the king’s death, but she still wanted them interacting less, if possible.

Arnold shot her a curious look. “Why do you seem so relieved?”

“Well, this has been my biggest project since I arrived in Galkhein, hasn’t it? Cleaning the detached wing and setting up the maids with their study group. I’m thrilled that it’s finally ready to use, Your Highness.” Although she lied about the *current* source of her pleasure, it wasn’t wholly untrue. She made a mental note to thank her maids again tomorrow for all their hard work.

Arnold smiled. “Living in a run-down palace and watching you hatch your schemes from up close would have been fun too.”

As a former maid myself, I wouldn’t have allowed that in a million years! Rishe objected fervently on the inside. If Arnold had to be moved from the main palace, she wanted assurance that everything would be perfect.

“Oh! Just one thing, Your Highness. I’ll be out of commission until noon in the coming days. If you don’t see me in the palace, I’m just soundly asleep. Don’t worry about me, all right?” It was the same thing she’d told her knights and maids when, in actuality, she’d be off practicing with the cadets all morning.

Arnold looked exasperated. “Even if you sleep until noon, going to bed too late means you won’t sleep well.”

“Ugh... Well, I am *trying* to get to bed early.”

“That’s rich coming from someone staying up all night to play doctor.” Arnold stuck his hand into his jacket pocket. He withdrew an object and tossed it to Rishe. “Here.”

Without thinking, Rishe reached out and caught it with both hands. She opened them to find a shining gold pocket watch—the same one Arnold had constantly checked when they were in town. “Your Highness! You mustn’t treat something this valuable so carelessly!”

“What do you mean? You caught it just fine, didn’t you? Go ahead and borrow it. Keep it on you at all times.”

Rishe’s eyes went wide at the unexpected suggestion. “You’re... lending me your pocket watch?!”

The pocket watch had been invented around four years ago. The only “clocks” available prior to that were a wall-mounted model—of which only one existed in the world—sundials that depended on fair weather, and water clocks that froze on cold days. Obviously, you couldn’t carry any of those around, making telling time difficult. Then came the pocket watch. There weren’t many of them in circulation yet, rendering each piece incredibly valuable. Only a select few nobles and royals had ever seen them, much less owned one, to say nothing of the common people, who didn’t even know they existed.

“It’s so precious, though. You can’t just lend it out like this.”

“What, you won’t use it?”

Deep down, she would’ve loved nothing more.

Arnold went on, “They’re still so new that people doubt their reliability, but I can promise this one is accurate as long as you keep it wound. It’s a lot more useful than a sundial.”

Yes, I know that. All too well, in fact. Rishe could easily recall the smile of the device’s inventor.

“Since they’re portable, they came in handy during the war,” Arnold said. “I did spend some time verifying its accuracy before it saw any practical use, however.”

Rishe pondered Arnold’s dispassionate comment. “What do you mean, ‘came in handy’? Was it because telling the precise time made it easier to coordinate your units?”

“Exactly. Using the sun or other natural gauges for time leaves you vulnerable to sudden changes in weather.”

The war would’ve come to an end not long after the pocket watch’s invention. *Clearly Prince Arnold is quick to integrate new technologies into his battle strategies. But he doesn’t trust blindly; he verifies their usefulness personally.*

No wonder countries that clung stubbornly to the old ways couldn’t win against Galkhein. Up close, it was easy to spot the sources of wartime superiority that had escaped her in the past.

Michel’s words suddenly rang through her head. “*There is no one willing to use this chemical the way I want it to be used.*” She stopped in her tracks, a shiver running up her spine.

Arnold, who was several paces ahead, turned back and gave her a curious look. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” Rishe took a deep breath and rejoined him. “Well, I’ll accept your offer and borrow this, then. It’ll be useful for mixing and administering medicine.”

“Oh? Administering it?”

“The pocket watch was invented for exactly this purpose, did you know? The person who taught me medicine found it very useful. Though it frustrated her too.”

“Ah, the one from Renhua?”

“Yes. She was an oddball, but an extremely talented apothecary nonetheless.” Rishe felt her chest swell with pride.

“I can’t imagine anyone outside of Renhua could ever compare. Is there something about that man from earlier? Is he more talented than your old apothecary teacher?” Arnold asked her.

“Professor Michel isn’t an apothecary. But he does mix drugs as part of his research, and he has some medicinal knowledge. He said it’s

not his field of expertise, though.”

While she explained, Rishe thought back to the first time she’d met Michel—when she arrived in Coyolles as an apothecary in her second life. *Master despised Michel the whole time we were there. She’d say, “Don’t compare my medicine with this man’s research.”*

Ultimately, Rishe had concluded that the two were similar *and* that they’d never get along. Every time they met in Coyolles Castle, Rishe’s master picked a fight. Hence Rishe’s awkward smile earlier when Michel had commented that he’d likely get along with her former master.

I never expected to reunite with Michel in a place like this. I wouldn’t have thought he’d be in Coyolles for another three years...

She’d been surprised out in the garden, but reflecting on it now, she found it naive. *In my second life, I didn’t meet him for three more years. And in my third life, when I was his student, I met him a year from now. And he never exactly told me he didn’t spend time in Coyolles...*

Interrupting her thoughts, Arnold asked, “Who is he, then?”

“He is...” What should she say? She hesitated before deciding the only solution was the truth. “He’s a scholar who studies the substances of this world and uses them to create new substances.”

“New substances...?”

“Yes. Apparently, he’s invented all sorts of compounds and tools to help him in his research.”

Arnold’s lips dipped in a slight frown. Evidently, he’d picked up on what she was alluding to.

“In Professor Michel’s case, I don’t think the creation of gold is his ultimate goal, but the most accurate term to describe him would be...” Rishe looked up at Arnold. “An alchemist.”

That was Michel’s profession—and, coincidentally, the title Rishe herself assumed as his student in her third life.

Early the next morning, Rishe disguised herself, donned the uniform of the knight cadets, and left before anyone else. Silent and

still, the empty practice grounds had a sterile air to them. Training wouldn't start for another ninety minutes.

I was especially careful when I snuck out. It took me about five extra minutes. Starting today, Arnold resided in the room right next to hers. He'd be sleeping right now, but she wouldn't be surprised if the smallest of noises alerted him to her presence.

When I'm finished cleaning, I'll stretch and then start my personal training. Okay!

Rishe gripped her broom tightly and began to sweep the training grounds. She organized the wooden swords leaning against the wall, then did her stretches. While she was getting limber, someone else walked onto the training ground.

"Fritz!" This was practically routine by now. She called out the same way she had the day before, but Fritz still twitched at the sound.

He offered a strained smile. "M-morning, Lu."

"Morning! What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Huh?! Oh, no! I just didn't sleep much last night!" Fritz said bashfully, scratching his head.

Rishe couldn't help worrying about him. He'd come all the way from Ceutena to the capital, spending his training living in unfamiliar circumstances. The smallest thing could negatively affect his health.

"Well, you don't look pale or anything... Do you have a fever? How's your appetite?"

"I ate breakfast like always, and I don't feel feverish."

"Could you pull down your eyelid for me?" She checked the color. It looked fine; he wasn't anemic like Kyle. Still, she wanted to examine him a little closer. "Excuse me, Fritz."

"Whoa!"

She took Fritz's hand and placed two fingertips against the large veins in his wrist. Rishe frowned, not liking what she felt. "Your pulse is awfully fast..."

"Aaah!" Fritz pulled back, flustered, and managed another awkward smile. "I ran here from the palace gate—uh, as part of my training! I may not have slept a lot, but I'm full of energy! A-and I wasn't losing sleep because I don't feel good..."

“So why were you, then?”

Fritz took a long look at Rishe and then covered his face with both hands, embarrassed. “I might have fallen in love.”

“What?! Congratulations!” He’d mentioned he’d been sightseeing in the capital during his afternoons; he must have met someone there. Whatever the case, fostering new relationships was a wonderful thing. “Someone I know once told me that knights in love get stronger faster!”

“R-really...?” Rishe’s blessing put a complicated look on Fritz’s face. They were the words of another nation’s knight captain. Maybe they sounded suspicious to him.

While they were chatting, another person showed up. This was the first time anyone other than Fritz had arrived so early. Turning, they saw a fellow knight cadet.

“Good morning, Sven.”

It was the rude trainee from the day before. Sven kept silent, not returning Rishe’s greeting.

Fritz stepped in front of her. “Yo, Sven. You’re up early for a change.”

“W-well, you mentioned yesterday that Lucius comes to the training grounds before anyone else! I didn’t believe you...”

“That’s right. That’s how Lu beat every single one of us! He works hard!”

Based on their conversation, Rishe could guess what had happened after yesterday’s training. Fritz was still defending her against her will.

“C’mon, Lu. Just ignore him. Let’s start for the day.”

“Thanks, Fritz. Could you wait a second, though?” Rishe faced Sven and asked, “Want to train with us?”

“Huh?! What are you talking about?! What good does it do you to invite me?! Just leave me alone!”

Rishe tilted her head to one side in confusion. “Knights don’t gain strength just to be the best swordsmen in the country, do they?”

“Wh-what?”

“They gain strength to protect the ones they care about. That’s

why it doesn't mean anything unless *everyone* improves. Even if you're the strongest person in the world, there's only so many you can save."

Sven stared at her, wide-eyed. She wasn't a knight in this life, but she still remembered the things she'd learned.

"Besides," she went on, "you stayed behind yesterday and trained by yourself some more, didn't you?"

"H-how do you know that?!"

"Because the ground here looks different than it did after practice."

She'd since flattened it down with the broom, but he had most likely sparred with someone. The dirt told her that story, as did the small bruises on Sven's wrists.

"We have limited time—training together will be more efficient. So, what do you say?"

"I didn't come here 'cause I wanted to train with you." Sven clenched a fist and took a deep breath. "Spar with me again, Lucius."

"Come *on*, Sven." Fritz gave him an exasperated look. "Lu won yesterday because he's strong. It wasn't a fluke. I know you don't want to admit it, but..."

"I know that!" Sven could barely get the words out. "Lucius and I are on completely different levels. I realized that when I lost to him! I've been thinking about it nonstop. I even talked to other people about what I'm missing—what I should do to get even a little stronger, or to beat him..." Taking a deep breath, he locked eyes with Rishe. "You're better than me! I know that, but I'm still asking for another match. That's the only way for me to figure out how to surpass you!"

Sven's shoulders trembled, his face turning red. He looked like he was going to cry as his frustration, anxiety, and embarrassment threatened to overflow. Asking something like this of Rishe took a lot of courage. "Please, Lucius. Give me another chance."

"Lu..." Fritz glanced at her.

Rishe nodded, smiling. "Sure. Let's do it."

Sven balked. "R-really?! That was so fast! I mean, I was so rude to you yesterday!"

"I don't care about that. I just didn't want to cause Fritz trouble."

Besides, I've got a new technique I'd like to try."

As Sven sputtered, Rishe went to the wall and picked up a couple of wooden swords. Along with the normal swords they'd used yesterday, there were also short blades about half their length. "By the way, can I ask what your conclusion was after all that?"

"You're strong, but you've barely got any stamina. If I overpower you, I can force you on the defensive."

"True, I'd struggle if you did that." Rishe smirked, picking up two regular swords and two short swords. "Fritz, would you mind participating in this match as well?"

"Yeah, of course! I was gonna ask to fight you too!"

"Hah, good. I'm glad you feel that way."

"Y-yeah..."

Rishe laughed with relief, though Fritz looked troubled. This sudden change in demeanor confused her, but she nonetheless handed him and Sven one sword each.

"I have another request." Rishe held the two short swords, one in each hand, and smiled. "Don't fight me one-on-one. Both of you come at me together."

"Wh—"

"Together?!"

Fritz and Sven exchanged a look.

"Lu. You want to go two against one?"

"That's right. Will you indulge me?"

Fritz agreed right away. "You said there's something new you want to try, right? Okay, I'm in."

"D-don't just agree without me, Fritz!" Sven protested. "We can't fight Lucius at the same time! That's not fair!"

"Sven, we won't be able to beat Lucius just by ganging up on him."

Sven hesitated, but with the other boy already on board, he eventually held up his weapon too.

Rishe pointed one of her blades at Sven. "I'm ready when you are."

“Let’s go!” Sven charged forward first with a wide, strong swing. He slashed out with all his might.

“Don’t rely on brute strength.” Rishe took one step back and dodged the blow. Sven immediately swung again, aiming for her shoulder. She swatted his sword away, and just that was enough to knock him off balance.

“Ugh...” Sven adjusted his grip. He was being hasty, but it was impressive that he hadn’t dropped his weapon in the scuffle.

“You don’t want to put all your weight into the strike. If you hit, it’ll be hard to maintain your position. If you miss, it’ll be even worse.”

“Yaaah!”

“Every time you attack, always be thinking ahead to your next move.” As Rishe explained, she blocked Sven’s blow with the sword in her left hand. Amid the loud clash of blades, she felt another one flying toward her. Rishe raised her right sword and blocked the attack from above.

“Whoa, you’re awesome, Lu!”

Grinning at Fritz’s enthusiasm, Rishe pushed the two of them back. She flipped her swords around and got in close to Sven. When she moved to jam a hilt into his gut, Sven blocked her.

“Nice moves! So close!”

Rishe spun around, swinging at Fritz this time. Fritz managed to block, but her attacks continued. If she couldn’t get a hit in on him, she switched to the other sword. Pushing Fritz back with her left, she swung at Sven with her right.

“Sven! Don’t block it, dodge it!”

“Augh!”

“Just like that! Sven, watch how Fritz moves—and Fritz, match your breathing to Sven’s!”

The two of them briefly looked at each other, then attacked Rishe as one. It still wasn’t enough.

“Almost there. If you were in the other person’s position, where would you aim for?”

“Ah...”

Sven shouted first. "Right, I get it! Fritz, get down!"

"Got it!"

At those words, Fritz dropped his hips without a moment's delay. He went down so low that he almost scraped the ground as he tried to sweep Rishe's legs from under her. The moment she jumped to dodge, Sven lunged. She brought up both hands, blocking his attack with her blades, twisting her upper body as soon as she landed. Caught up in her motion, Sven fell in front of Fritz. Fritz reached out to protect him, grabbing his arm and yanking him upright again, and the two of them immediately launched into another attack. Rishe blocked them with both swords.

Feeling the impact of the blows, Rishe couldn't suppress her excitement. *Amazing! They're already way better!*

They'd been attacking separately before, but the moment they focused on working together, their movements completely transformed. She had to wonder if they realized it. Even as she caught their swords, their eyes were still full of life. They were having the time of their lives, and it was clear as day on their faces.

"Fritz, we'll push through on our next attack!"

"Yeah, let's do it!"

"Good choice. But too bad!" Rishe took a short breath and then swiftly drew back.

"Huh?!"

Without Rishe's swords to push against, the boys lost their balance. She took advantage of the moment to strike at Fritz's sword, spinning the tip of her blade. Unable to withstand the coiling motion, Fritz let go of his weapon, which went flying into the distance. Rishe moved into Sven's range next.

"Ugh!"

She brought her left blade down, and Sven blocked her with a horizontal guard. With his sword tensed for an impact from above, it was weak to a strike from below. Rishe batted her right sword upward, loosening Sven's grip as well. His weapon spun in the air and hit the ground.

"Haah, haah, hah..."

Their match at an end, the two boys were in a daze.

Rishe whipped her swords through the air and beamed at them. “It’s just like I figured during our matches yesterday. You two have good combat compatibility.”

“M-me and Fritz...?”

“That’s right. I wanted to see how you’d work together. I’m glad I got an opportunity so soon.”

Both of them had talent, and it seemed they had a similar approach to swordsmanship. Otherwise, they wouldn’t work so well together with just a few words of advice. If they both became knights, she was sure they’d progress incredibly quickly. Rishe grinned, imagining that future for them—but Fritz and Sven were still slack-jawed.

“So the thing you wanted to try wasn’t a skill or a strategy...but *us*?”

“That’s right. It was really fun too. I’d love to do it again tomorrow!”

Sven’s expression hardened. “I can’t believe you...”

“Aha ha ha!” As for Fritz, he seemed to find the whole thing hilarious. “We’ll have to meet up for morning practice again tomorrow, Sven! Let’s have a strategy meeting so we can beat Lu!”

“Fine! I’ll be here, dammit! In fact, I’ll get here before you do, Lucius. I dunno when you come and start stretching, but you won’t beat me next time!”

I actually clean before I stretch, but that’s just a personal habit. I won’t mention it.

Then Sven squeezed out, “Sorry. For everything.”

“I told you it didn’t bother me, didn’t I?”

At that, Sven looked to be on the verge of tears. “...I’ll beat you one of these days.”

“Yeah. I don’t plan on going easy on you, though.”

“Damn it!”

Rishe smiled, then felt eyes on her. When she turned, she found Fritz staring at her hard. “What’s up, Fritz?”

“Huh?! Oh, no, it’s nothing! I guess I was just thinking you smile a lot, Lu!”

“You think so? Thanks. But to me, you’re the one who always seems so cheerful, Fritz.”

Deep down, she *wished* she could smile more, but when she let her mind wander, it tended to latch on to her worries. She fought to keep them off her face as she focused on the entrance to the training grounds. There was no one else around yet, but it was still early.

Lord Lawvine will be here soon... I have to gather as much information as I can during today’s training. I need to be prepared for tonight!

Thus, Rishe covertly hyped herself up for the coming party.

Rishe chose a deep blue dress to wear that evening. Her maid Elsie did her hair, braiding it together in the back and curling the loose bits around her face. The result was festive yet elegant and composed. Whenever Rishe moved, her pearl earrings swayed to and fro. Dressed up in the “understated but not conservative” look she’d requested of her maids, Rishe went over her strategy until a knock came at the door.

“Lady Rishe, I’ve brought you some mail.” The maid handed her two letters.

One was from a girl named Mary. She was the fiancée of Prince Dietrich, the man to whom Rishe had once been engaged. Mary and Rishe had been corresponding ever since she’d come to Galkhein.

Lady Mary... I see you’re still working hard for Prince Dietrich at the palace.

Mary—who had “stolen” Rishe’s fiancé from her—was still engaged to the prince, but now it had far less to do with marrying a rich man for her family’s sake. Apparently, Dietrich had been on the verge of being disowned by his father the king, and Mary was putting in a great deal of effort to his reform to prevent it. From the letter, Rishe gleaned that people did not always treat her well, but Mary was still doing her best to be both kind and strict with her fiancé nonetheless.

I'll have to write a reply as soon as the party is over. Now for the other letter.

She turned over the second envelope to find “Crystal Light Jewelers” written in one corner—the jewelry store she had visited with Arnold. One of the items enclosed was the design for her ring. Rishe almost gasped in awe when she saw it.

It's beautiful...

So beautiful, in fact, that she wanted to forget everything and stare at it forever. Yet she resisted the urge and forced her eyes to the letter, which contained a list of notes the proprietress had on her grandson's design.

In addition, it read: *“I mentioned the ring would take a month to make, but it seems some craftsmen from Coyolles have arrived in the capital. If I commission them, the ring will be completed much sooner, so you have that to look forward to.”*

Rishe blinked her wide eyes, surprised. *Simply assigning different craftsmen to work on the ring means it could be finished that much sooner? That's great news, though. If the ring is ready fast, I can have my dress made to match. Mr. Tully did say I should choose the fabric sooner rather than later.*

She glanced back at the design. *Normally, the dress would come first, I suppose. But I find myself wanting to prioritize the ring...*

“Lady Rishe. It's time.”

“Oh, you're right. I apologize.” Rishe took a deep breath, put her letters away, and headed to the party.

The gala was held in the largest hall of the imperial palace. Once again, Rishe entered with Arnold. The sparkling chandeliers and the extravagant costumes of the attendees made for a spectacular sight. Arnold—who didn't like parties—already wore a dour look.

“Your Highness, your thoughts are written all over your face.”

“That's fine. I'm putting them there.”

Their short exchange was interrupted by Kyle, the guest of honor.

“Prince Arnold, thank you so much for holding such a grand event for me.” Kyle bowed, turning to Rishe. “Lady Rishe, you were beautiful earlier today, but in a situation like this, your beauty surpasses words. You look akin to a mythical flower that only blooms under moonlight.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. I hope you have a wonderful time tonight.” Rishe smiled politely, ignoring his social pleasantries.

I’ve greeted Prince Kyle. There’s my minimum duties fulfilled.

Rishe looked up at Arnold. “Your Highness, I think I’ll go chat with the ladies.”

It was Arnold’s duty to introduce Kyle to the nobility in attendance. Conversations between a crown prince, a foreign prince, and several high-ranking nobles were no place for Rishe—who was merely a royal’s fiancée. This came as some relief; since they hadn’t yet married, she didn’t have to participate in the meeting between Kyle and Lawvine. But avoiding the count completely during her time in the hall would be no easy feat.

“I’ll see you later, Prince Arnold. Prince Kyle, please enjoy yourself.” With the most elegant curtsy, Rishe casually detached from the group. She wished she could take some countermeasures, but if she did anything strange next to Prince Arnold, people would notice.

I should be fine from this distance. Now, I need to concentrate...

Having escaped to one of the walls, Rishe took a deep breath. She strained her ears as she watched the party swirl around her. Conversations mixed with the clatter of shoes on the floor. She did her best to separate individual sounds from the morass. And not just sounds. All around her were brilliant dresses and capes, countless men and women on all sides. The more she concentrated, the wider her field of vision grew and the farther she could see.

There he is. Rishe’s honed senses drew her focus to one spot. He was so far away that she could hardly make out his face, but she’d found Lawvine. Given that she’d spent the last few days training under him, she was absolutely certain. She’d paid especially careful attention this morning, memorizing the feel of his presence.

Rishe sucked in another breath, closing her eyes. Now that she’d located him, she didn’t need her vision to tell he was moving. Opening her eyes to confirm, Rishe entered the next stage of her plan.

“Good evening, Lady Rishe.”

“Lady Barthel. Thank you so much for telling me about that wonderful brand of tea the other day.”

“Oh, Lady Rishe! That’s an amazing dress. May I ask which merchant supplied it?”

“I’m honored you think so. I got it from the Aria Trading Company.”

Rishe slipped through the venue, trading greetings with various women, taking care to not disturb the atmosphere or be rude. All the while, she made sure no one realized she was avoiding Lawvine.

He’s headed for the center of the hall. Prince Arnold and Prince Kyle are on the western side. From what I know of Lord Lawvine’s personality, he’ll move toward the prince as soon as he spots him...

Keeping a close eye on her mark, Rishe walked about the hall as naturally as she could, predicting his movements.

Ah, he stopped. He must be talking to someone. I’ve got time to strike up a chat, then, she decided, initiating a conversation with someone she’d met at a previous party.

When Lawvine’s presence set off again, Rishe swiftly ended her chitchat as well. This method took up a lot of concentration, but Rishe had no choice while the evening dragged on.

In my fifth life, I could have tracked someone like this for half a day at least... Come to think of it, concentration is also tied to stamina, isn’t it?

Once more, Rishe found herself wishing for a hardier body. While bemoaning her poor physical condition, she spotted Arnold and Kyle a distance away. They were close enough to see clearly but too far to overhear. Even while introducing Kyle to some noble or another, Arnold wore a listless look, like he was in a bad mood. Kyle, on the other hand, interacted with each of the Galkhein nobles in earnest. The group appeared to be swapping opinions on something.

They’re so picturesque...

Raven-haired Arnold and Prince Kyle with his silvery locks were cut from very different cloth, but both were incredibly attractive. All the nearby women’s eyes were glued to them.

A portrait of those two would make a killing. And if the image ever

disseminated into the lower classes, that one painting could create enormous profit...

“My, Lady Rishe, what are you thinking about with such a solemn look on your face?”

“Good evening. I’m just negotiating how I can take in everything I’m learning this evening and transform it into economic stimulation.”

“How wonderful!” The marchioness speaking with her grinned. “I have just the person to introduce to you, Lady Rishe. Right here, Baron Weilman.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Lady Rishe.”

“The honor is mine, Lord Weilman. I’m pleased to have the opportunity to make your acquaintance today.” Rishe curtsied, searching her memories. She’d reviewed information on all the Galkhein nobility.

Baron Weilman. Last generation’s head of the family was a merchant who bought himself a title through his success.

The baron smiled gently. It was a pleasant expression, and the man himself was well mannered. “Normally, someone like myself would never dare speak to the future crown princess, but I heard about you from my mother, you see. I simply had to meet you, so I asked the marchioness to introduce me.”

“Your mother, you say?”

“Yes. You recently visited her store, Lady Rishe.”

A stir went through the crowd.

“Lady Rishe did business with that moody old crone?!”

“Not even the previous empress could shop at that store, and she...”

Listening to gossip around her, Rishe hit upon the woman’s identity. “Your mother, would she happen to be...?”

“Yes. Thank you very much for purchasing that gem,” the baron said. “My mother was over the moon about it.”

“Did you hear that?! Lady Rishe really did buy a gem from that store!”

As the commotion grew louder, Rishe became flustered. While she

had heard that store chose its customers carefully, she didn't think it would lead to such an uproar. She hastened to correct the baron. "I merely chose the gem. I didn't buy it from your mother—Prince Arnold did."

"Wh-what?!"

"Prince Arnold bought a woman a gem?!"

Yeah, it surprised me too. Rishe decided not to say anything else. The baron smiled wider, effortlessly guiding the conversation in another direction.

"My son went home that day and immersed himself in the design. Feel free to let me know if there's anything about it that doesn't suit your fancy."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly! It's such a beautiful, detailed design. I'm greatly looking forward to the finished product." Curious, Rishe asked, "Come to think of it, I heard that there were some craftsmen from Coyolles willing to complete the ring in much less time. Does a different set of hands really make such a difference?"

"Lady Rishe... The truth is, there are no skilled craftsmen in Galkhein."

Rishe was flabbergasted.

"Anything designed above a certain level of detail requires supremely skilled hands, and the closest place to find any is across the sea, in Coyolles. That means most of our production period is spent on transport, but since the craftsmen are here in town now, that period was expedited. I believe that is what my mother meant."

Listening in, the marchioness remarked, "I did think it was inconvenient that jewelry takes so long to complete. But why does Galkhein have no craftsmen?"

"Because of the war, madam."

"I see..." The lady's eyes went wide with the revelation, though Rishe had been expecting it.

"Military prowess is valued in Galkhein, isn't it? Many young people train in swordplay and martial arts. Craftsmen were already rare before the war, but there are even fewer now."

Rishe had seen the same thing in her life as a merchant. Fewer

people were buying jewelry, so the craftsmen lost their jobs and became soldiers instead.

What I saw in the future war was just a repeat of the past war. Most of the countries skilled in handling precious metals weren't active in the conflict. Coyolles—with their skilled artisans—mostly just supported their allied nations.

In Coyolles, people couldn't even leave their houses in the winter. Their forced yearly quarantine, along with their ample supply of gemstones, made it the perfect place for such craftsmen to hone their skills.

"There are plenty of blacksmiths here, but iron-processing techniques for weaponry are completely different from ornamental metals... Oh, but this is hardly an appropriate topic of conversation for ladies like yourselves."

The marchioness hurriedly agreed with the baron. "That's right, Lord Weilman. You do just love to go on about the war, don't you? Such talk is poison for ladies like us. I apologize for bringing up such a ghastly topic, Lady Rishe."

"Not at all. It was very informative." Rishe bowed her head politely and returned to her thoughts.

I always figured Galkhein obtained a great deal from winning the war, but even an undefeated nation sustains losses, I suppose.

She wanted to hear more, but there was no time for that. She feigned additional conversation and searched for her target. *Lord Lawvine's stuck in a discussion on the other side of the room.*

In confirming that, Rishe realized something else. *Prince Arnold and Prince Kyle are going out to the balcony...?*

When she searched out their presences, she found Kyle leading Arnold out and away from prying eyes. Rishe said her polite goodbyes and quietly followed. Once she was close enough, she could tell that it was indeed only the princes out there on the balcony together. Arnold would likely notice any approach, so Rishe suppressed her presence as much as she possibly could. She could walk without making a sound, even in high heels. She hid behind a pillar and strained her ears, splitting her attention between the balcony and Lawvine across the room.

“Galkhein is truly a wonderful country. Its prosperity is a credit to you, Your Highness, and His Majesty as well.” Kyle’s voice was hard. He was attempting to start the conversation from a casual place and failing. His nervous determination was seeping into his words; there was no way Arnold wouldn’t see through him.

“There’s no need for prevarication or transparent compliments.” Just as she thought he would, Arnold cut through Kyle’s facade. “Get to the point. I want to know why you pushed yourself to make the journey all the way here despite your frail health.”

After a deep breath, Kyle said, “I truly respect all that you’ve achieved as crown prince, with every inch of myself. Your policies always have your citizens’ best interests at heart. I’ve come to you instead of your father because I thought you might understand my feelings.”

“...”

“I come seeking Galkhein’s help for Coyolles. And I don’t mean monetary or medical contributions.” Kyle paused and looked at Arnold. “I am requesting military aid.”

Rishe gasped. Coyolles was not a warmongering country. They were severely lacking in military might, after all. In an extremely cold region, surrounded by far more powerful nations, Coyolles maintained relations with its neighbors with savvy diplomacy and the wealth its resources afforded them.

“As you know, Coyolles’s military is almost nonexistent—but that’s not by choice. Our neighbors have long put pressure on us to keep our standing army small. We are suffered only as we continue to provide precious gems to nearby countries and by never building up any sort of strength to resist them.”

In another life, Rishe had heard Kyle say these words with the same bitter frustration. Which one had it been?

“The fate of our country is in the hands of other nations. The royal family is constantly threatened with destruction at our neighbors’ whims. I wish to escape those circumstances and do everything I can to protect my people. We must become masters of our own fate, and I beg your assistance in achieving this goal.”

Arnold’s response was more of a growl than usual. “In other words, Coyolles wishes to abandon its relationships with its neighbors

and ally with Galkhein instead?”

“Yes, it’s exactly as you say.”

Silence descended on the balcony for some time, amplified by the din of the party just beyond it. Kyle’s anxiety seemed to fill the space to the brim.

After a while, Arnold’s cold voice broke the silence. “I’d been wondering what you wanted. Tell me, what is the point of royalty if they have gone senile with peace?”

The air on the balcony grew even more tense.

“Asking for military assistance from a country separated by the sea to wage war against your neighboring nations is foolish. And what could Coyolles even offer us in exchange for our assistance?”

“We would immediately move all exports of gems and precious metals from other countries to Galkhein. We will completely forgo profit and sell them more cheaply than the material you can mine within your own borders.”

At last, Rishe understood what Kyle was getting at. On the surface, he appeared to be prioritizing national defense at the expense of everything else. But it was clear to her that wasn’t what he intended at all.

You can’t do this, Prince Kyle. Rishe hung her head and imagined how she’d speak to him. *You’re too honest. You’re not used to lying.*

“Don’t make me laugh.” As expected, Arnold easily picked up on the hidden message behind Kyle’s words. “In your place, I would never make such a proposal to another country, and if I did, I would certainly put a time limit on it. Exporting gems—your country’s greatest resource—with no regard for profit is slow suicide.”

“That’s...”

“There must be a reason you felt no compulsion to limit the deal. Maybe one you aren’t even conscious of.”

Arnold was right. Rishe knew enough to back up his conjecture—that is, the shape Coyolles’s export industry would take in a few short years.

“Coyolles is running out of gems to mine, isn’t it?”

Kyle went quiet.

I see...

Rishe had interacted with Kyle in several of her lives, and she felt the two of them were pretty close in each, but she was only ever a lone merchant or apothecary. Naturally, he'd kept such weighty problems a secret from her.

Of course. He could only reveal something like this to the people most central to Coyolles's government.

Coyolles had, in the past, protected itself with little more than political marriages and wealth. Without that wealth, its national identity would disappear. Once it had nothing left to offer its neighboring countries, it would only be a matter of time before they clashed—with the victor inevitably adding Coyolles's territory to its own.

Something like that happened in the future...

When Arnold became emperor and declared war on the world, a country with no military might like Coyolles was forced to surrender before the fighting even started, doing its best to minimize the damage. But the countries *surrounding* Coyolles didn't allow that. Ships from Galkhein had to enter the continent through Coyolles's ports—enemy seizure of which would have been an unprecedented blow to the other northern countries. So Coyolles's allied nations forced it to fight, threatening to invade Coyolles themselves if it refused. Having no choice, they entered the war. They mustered what few knights they had and lost almost all of them.

Rishe still remembered that from her life as an apothecary.

"Weitzner. I want to protect this country."

It had happened when there were almost no knights left in Coyolles. Kyle had taken up a sword himself, not listening when Rishe tried to stop him.

"I'll do anything it takes. Fortune has allowed me to live this long, and therefore I must shoulder this great task."

Rishe didn't know what became of Kyle after that—she'd lost her own life on a battlefield while providing medical aid.

"There's a part of this I don't understand." Arnold's tone proved he had no interest whatsoever in what he was asking. "Your actions are nothing but folly. Why would you come all the way here with no plan?"

Kyle answered quickly, "I won't live much longer." He slowed down, speaking with a sort of tragic determination. "New life will soon be born into our royal family. I need to use the rest of my time to preserve the future for that child, along with the citizens of my country."

"Hah!" It was obvious that none of this mattered to Arnold. The words that came out of his mouth next were unexpected: "Want to know my secret to winning wars?"

"Pardon me?"

The hidden Rishe was just as surprised as Kyle. Arnold didn't let Kyle's reaction stop him.

"As a king, win the hearts of your people with your policies. As a military commander, choose resourceful generals who excel at leadership." His footsteps echoed loudly. "Select skilled soldiers who will follow commands and maintain order without fail. Rewards and punishments for soldiers must be fair *and* they must be strict. Keep a firm grasp on the terrain of a battle and fight in favorable weather conditions whenever you can. There's more, but that covers the basics."

Arnold went on, "Even if you follow every bit of my advice, Coyolles still won't win a war—you don't have the power to apply it. Can your people stop chopping firewood for winter to undergo military training instead? Do you have time to quarrel with other countries instead of growing food?"

"I..."

"Past royals likely decided to try diplomacy for just this reason." Arnold turned to Kyle and said mercilessly, "True talent consists of putting existing knowledge into practice. And I have no interest in those without talent... Not even a prince from another nation."

"Please wait, Prince Arnold!"

"No. You seem to be laboring under a misapprehension, so let me speak plainly: In regards to this matter, the emperor and I are of the same mind." The atmosphere went frigid. "I'd much rather conquer a country than ally with one."

Arnold's footsteps came closer, so Rishe hurried to leave before he noticed her. She ditched the hall, paying close attention to Lawvine's presence all the while. Escaping the party's chattering, she hid in a

palace corridor. Hunching in the corner, she allowed her thoughts to take over. Her mind was roiling with the conversation she'd just overheard.

This is a turning point. Rishe took a shallow breath. Prince Kyle proposed an alliance with Prince Arnold. It might be a trivial incident in Galkhein's history, but for Coyolles, this is a crucial moment that leads to the tragedy five years from now.

Coyolles only had two choices: face destruction at the hands of Galkhein or face destruction at the hands of its neighbors. If it were to ally with Galkhein here, and that alliance granted it the power to fend off neighboring countries, Coyolles need not meet the same fate.

I can't mess up now. Rishe's lips pressed into a tight line as she racked her brains. Kyle is willing to do whatever it takes to form an alliance with Galkhein. But that doesn't matter. If Coyolles is bargaining from a subordinate position, they'll just be swapping one master for another.

There was only one good solution. *Coyolles, which doesn't have much power, must form an equal relationship with the extremely formidable Galkhein.*

Rishe felt like collapsing where she stood. Was such a thing even possible? She had no way to meet with the emperor of Galkhein—all she could do was focus on changing Arnold's mind.

"I'd much rather conquer a country than ally with one."

He'd sounded like he meant it. Rishe clenched her fists, despairing at the enormity of the task set before her.

Chapter 3

ALL RIGHT! What about this, Lucius?!”

Something sliced through the air in concert with Sven’s shout. Dressed as a boy, Rishe clapped, her eyes sparkling. Sven’s sword drew beautiful lines in the air.

“That’s amazing, Sven! Your form was perfect just now!” Rishe was always excited to watch people improve.

Sven’s face lit up at her praise before he schooled his expression and straightened up. “It’s only natural for me, really... Heh.”

He swung again and again, tracing the same lines he’d drawn before. Repetition was one of the best ways to learn—she was happy to see him being so proactive about it.

Rishe put her own wooden sword down, gauging the hour from the position of the sun. “It’s about that time—let’s take a break and then clean the training grounds.”

“Hmph, I won’t let you clean better than me either. I’m gonna go drink some water first.”

Rishe watched Sven head toward the well. She spun around. “Hey, Fritz. In that sparring match, you—”

“Wagh!” Fritz, who was doing practice swings behind her, dropped his sword.

“Sorry! You were concentrating, huh?”

“Oh, n-no, not really! Er, I mean, yeah! I was!”

Fritz reached for his sword, fingers brushing against Rishe’s as they went for it at the same time. They only touched for a split second, but Fritz yelped and leaped back like he’d been electrocuted.

“Huh, did I shock you? That’s strange... It shouldn’t be dry enough in this season for static electricity.”

“No, Lu! Why are your fingers so slender and dainty?! ”

“M-my fingers?! ” Rishe jumped, remembering a time in her knightly life when someone had found out she was a woman from her

build. She smiled to cover up her reaction as best as she could. “Mine are normal, don’t you think? You two train a lot, so yours are probably sturdier than most people’s.”

“R-right... Yours are normal... They’re normal...”

She found herself worrying about Fritz again as he muttered to himself. He’d said he hadn’t slept well the day before; maybe he really was feeling under the weather.

“D-don’t worry about me. What about you, Lu? Are you okay?”

“Hmm? I’m fine. My muscles are a lot less sore than before.”

“That’s good—though you do seem kind of down. Normally, you never let training get to you, no matter how tough it is, but you were hanging your head and sighing earlier. I was just a little concerned.”

Rishe was surprised that Fritz had been paying so much attention to her. *He really does have the makings of a knight. He keeps a watchful eye on everything around him, and he looks out for others even during his own training. That’s not easy.* Knights like this tended to be suited to leadership positions.

Basking in her renewed appreciation for Fritz, she apologized for worrying him. “I’m sorry. I’ve just had a lot on my mind.”

“I get it. I won’t ask you what it is you’re worried about, but let me know if there’s anything I can do. Sometimes just talking about something can help.”

“Thanks, Fritz.”

“Don’t mention it. You should sit and rest for a bit longer. Want me to get you some water?”

“No, I’m fine,” Rishe said. “Watch your own hydration levels, though.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll be right back.”

Rishe waved to Fritz as he headed to the well, then slowly sank onto the bench. *There’s no way I can tell him my worries.*

She couldn’t say she needed to change the future and prevent a war from breaking out several years from now, nor could she explain her current task of improving Galkhein’s relations with Coyolles. How would Fritz react to, “Hey, how would you put two countries on an equal bargaining footing?”

Moreover, Rishe hadn't spoken to Arnold since she'd overheard his conversation on the balcony last night. Well, they'd talked, but not about anything significant. Under scrutiny of the party guests and their own guards, she couldn't mention important matters. Even if they *had* been alone together, she would've been at a loss over how to bring up his discussion with Kyle.

I wonder if last night's events happened in my other lives too. She could barely sleep after witnessing it. Rishe hugged her knees, resting her forehead on top of them, and thought. Prince Kyle's pretext for coming to this country was to celebrate my engagement to Prince Arnold. That makes me think this might be the first time.

And even if the princes' conversation *had* occurred in her past lives, Galkhein and Coyolles had never been allies. In other words, the talks never went well. She really couldn't let this opportunity pass by.

As her thoughts went in circles, she was approached by a presence she recognized.

"Alcott. You're early."

"Lord Lawvine!" Rishe's guard went up at the sight of him; he shot her an odd look as he entered the training grounds. She didn't think she'd been *that* obvious, so he really was observant. She couldn't very well say, "I spent all last night fleeing from your presence—this was just reflex!"

"I heard Fritz Knowland yelling, so I came to see if there was trouble. Are you not feeling well?"

"I was just resting!" Rishe hurriedly brushed the dust from her clothes. "I was brooding over something pretty pathetic, and the guilt really got to me. I couldn't help my knee-jerk reaction when I saw you." She was trying to play off her suspicious behavior, though it wasn't even a lie.

"Something pathetic, you say?"

Rishe hesitated for a moment, then said, "When we cadets become knights, and we end up going to war, then...*they'd* all have to fight in that war, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose they would."

"I was thinking how everyone here might have a dangerous future in store for them...and that kind of scared me."

In truth, she'd been thinking that for some time now. In her life as a knight, Galkhein was the enemy. Their knights were truly powerful and a terrible threat on the battlefield, but it wasn't as if none of them ever died. Looking at Fritz and the other cadets, she wanted them to achieve their dreams. But at the rate things were going, those dreams would lead them to war.

"My son lost his life in the last war," Lawvine said with a soft smile. "As much as I would like to praise him for fighting with pride and meeting an honorable end, I deeply wish he were still alive."

"Oh, Lord Lawvine..." Rishe could say nothing more, so Lawvine continued.

"I want the young people of today to grow up strong. I want their futures to be full of hope. I long for it, having lost my own son." His voice was kind but forlorn. Rishe realized for the first time why he watched over the trainees with such sympathy in his eyes. "War steals people's futures. To conquer that fear, you have to stand against it."

"Stand against it how?"

"You must not deny your hopes or your emotions. Rather, let them be the fuel that drives you forward. Find your mission and complete it."

Rishe considered his words. *My hopes...and my mission.*

Rishe had been a knight herself once. She had a lord she respected, and she'd sworn to protect him and his family. Even now, she didn't regret giving up her life for them. At the same time, she balked at the thought of those she treasured being in danger. She didn't want to watch her comrades lose their lives the way she had.

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, it appears there's nothing to worry about here, so I'll be on my way. See you later." With that, Lawvine dipped his head politely and left the training grounds.

Watching him go, she thought, *I want to be free. I don't want to die. For this, I need to stop the war. And I don't want Coyolles to be destroyed either. But that's not all...*

She squatted down again and squeezed her eyes shut, digging deep. *Right now, Galkhein's military might is feared the world over. Because of its overwhelming power, it has no favorable equal relationships with other*

countries.

Before, Rishe assumed it was Arnold's father—the emperor—who ruled with such warlike ferocity, but last night Arnold had said he and the emperor were of the same mind. Rishe recalled Arnold's words and self-deprecating tone. *He said, "I'd rather conquer a country than ally myself with one." Does he really believe that?* It had been a month and a half since she'd come to Galkhein. Having observed Arnold from up close, she just couldn't see it.

If Prince Arnold thinks of himself that way... She slowly opened her eyes. I need to tell him it's not true. He might not even realize. And she couldn't just say it—she needed to make him see it for himself.

There must be countries that Galkhein didn't annex, that they don't yet have hostile relationships with. If it wasn't just Coyolles, but many others—maybe Prince Arnold's future actions would change as well.

Rishe slowly stood up. She took a deep breath and slapped her cheeks, then looked ahead. *I have to think hard and charge forward to bring my hopes to fruition! Time's going to keep moving. Nothing will change if I don't act!*

While she gave herself a pep talk, Sven and Fritz returned from their water break.

"Sorry that took so long, Lu. Huh? You look like you're doing better."

"Yeah. I realized I just needed to think, and there's no point in worrying."

When training was over, she would plan her next moves. As Fritz had said, her head was clearer, and she felt much better.

"Observing your training today is the very lord you will serve with your lives: the crown prince of this nation."

After training began, the sight of the man before them sent a great stir through the knight cadets. They all knew they shouldn't get too excited, but they couldn't help themselves. Fritz, who was standing next to Rishe, was so surprised by the guest appearance that he almost

toppled over.

Rishe alone was trying desperately to keep the grimace off her face. She yearned to clutch her head in her hands. Lawvine went on with his introduction, oblivious to her plight.

“His Highness, Arnold Hein!”

Right in front of Rishe, the man with the most beautiful eyes in the world glowered down at her.

Chapter 4

W*H-WHAT is he doing here?! Why would the crown prince show up at knight cadet training?!*

Rishe was positive Theodore had said there was no chance of this happening, but she could never mistake the handsome figure standing before her.

Arnold stared at her in silence. Cold sweat dripped down her neck. They probably only held each other's gaze for a second—the span of a blink—but to Rishe it felt like forever. In her life as a knight, there were moments of tension in battle when everything around her seemed to slow down, but she wasn't even holding a sword right now. Why was she so nervous?

While Rishe was doing her best to keep her cool, Arnold looked away and turned to command the vassal standing at his side.

“Lawvine. Hurry and get started.”

Huh?! Talk about anticlimactic...

Arnold continued dispassionately, “I want to see how they move. What's the schedule for today?”

“Yes, sir. They've already done some sparring. They'll stretch and run, spar again, then do some physical conditioning. Is that acceptable?”

“Move the sparring directly after stretching. I want to see what they can do after limbering up but before expending too much stamina.”

The trainees all stood up straighter while Arnold spoke. He hadn't looked back at Rishe a second time.

M-maybe he hasn't noticed...? Surely that was impossible; she squashed her own wishful thinking. She may have been wearing a short-haired wig, but she'd only disguised her face with a little makeup. Anyone who knew Rishe would recognize her at little more than a glance. Even if she *had* changed everything, this was Arnold. She was sure he'd see through her just from how she stood, the way she walked, and her unique gestures.

I only had to get away with this for ten days too! Why am I running into him here when he's so busy with his work?!

After receiving Arnold's command, Lawvine gave directions to the trainees. "Start with your usual stretching. Don't let His Highness's presence distract you."

"Yes, sir!" the trainees answered as one, scattering to their usual places. Rishe fled to the far end of the training grounds, paying attention to Arnold's gaze.

"Can you believe it, Lu?! His Highness is really here!"

"Y-yeah. It's great, isn't it?" Rishe said with a strained smile, indulging in another bit of wishful thinking. *Maybe he'll just overlook this.* He might pretend he hadn't seen her and keep his silence. Then Rishe would be able to keep up her training. With that faint hope in her heart, Rishe did her usual conditioning and sparring.

"Well?"

"..."

After training was over, Rishe was called out behind the practice grounds, where she found herself—despairingly—between a wall and Arnold. He hadn't paid Rishe any mind as he analyzed the cadets' abilities. She'd prayed it would end without further conflict, but this dashed the last of her hopes.

"What exactly do you think you're doing here?"

"Uh..."

With him staring down at her from so close, Rishe couldn't look Arnold in the eye. Feeling the wall against her back, she was forced to awkwardly look away.

"I...I hope you're doing well today, Your Highness. I'm honored that you would speak personally to a mere trainee such as myself..."

"Oh?"

Even though she knew he'd seen through her completely, she tried a last-ditch effort. They were alone here, but she still didn't want to risk anyone overhearing them.

"I see." Arnold slowly reached out. He'd been wearing black gloves a lot lately, but right now his hands were bare. Rishe was trying to figure out what he intended to do...when he put both palms on her

face and squished her cheeks.

“Mrh?!”

“If you’re not who I think you are, then you won’t mind me touching you skin-to-skin, will you?”

Rishe’s only response was to jump.

“I don’t want to break faith with my fiancée, you see. But if you’re just a simple trainee, then I don’t have to worry about any of those agreements.”

H-his face is so close! He tipped her chin upward with his hands as he drew nearer. No matter how many times she saw it, his countenance looked like a work of art, and being so close felt like it did more harm than good. *Plus, it feels like this happened once before...*

As soon as she thought that, she remembered: Arnold had taken her face into his hands, tilted it upward, and brought his lips to hers. The breathless sensation she’d felt then was vividly revived, her cheeks burning in an instant.

Arnold’s hands were cool against her heated skin. She wondered if he knew what she was remembering. That thought made it even harder to look him in the eyes, but Arnold showed her no mercy.

“Well? No arguments?”

“Your Highness! I thought you were angry at first, but you’re enjoying this, aren’t you?!”

“Why would I enjoy doing this to a mere trainee?” Arnold asked, squeezing Rishe’s cheeks again.



With the way he was holding her, she was barely able to speak. “Prince Arnold, please back off for a second!”

“I don’t think I will.”

“But what if someone—”

She heard footsteps. Arnold must have heard them too, but he didn’t let go.

“Hey, Lu? Lucius, where are y—”

Just the person she’d expected stepped around to the back of the training grounds. Their eyes met awkwardly, and Rishe gulped. It was Fritz.

“Oh...”

He was witnessing precisely what Rishe didn’t want anyone to see. Arnold had her up against a wall, holding her face with both hands, staring intently at her.

“P-Prince Arnold?!” Fritz yelped without thinking, then hurried to correct himself. “I-I mean, Your Highness! Huh? Wait, Lu?! Why?!”

“Fritz! It’s not what you think!”

He was just toying with her as a joke. Rishe needed to explain Arnold’s behavior before it was misunderstood.

But before she could, Fritz yelled, his voice cracking, “S-so sorry for interrupting!”

Interrupting what?!

And just like that, he was off and running.

“Hey! Fritz, wait!” she called after him, but he made a beeline for...anywhere but here. “Somebody saw us just now, Your Highness! In fact, he got a good look! I mean, it was Fritz, so I’m sure it’ll be fine, but who knows what kind of rumors someone else might spread!”

“And what will happen if someone spreads rumors? Would that be a problem?”

“It’d be a big problem!”

“Oh? How so?”

“Well...”

“Yes?”

Mortified, Rishe said meekly, “Well, don’t you have a fiancée...?”

Arnold froze, and a strange silence followed. Rishe wasn’t sure what to make of it. Eventually, he said, “I suppose I do.”

“R-right! You shouldn’t be seen in such a place with a mere trainee.”

“That being said...”

He pinched her cheeks again, and she let out a strange yelp. “Mrph!”

“This ‘mere trainee’ is speaking to me in an awfully relaxed manner.”

“Urgh...” Rishe made up her mind. She felt bad for Theodore, who’d helped her, but this was as far as she could go. “I apologize...”

“What are you apologizing for, hmm?” Arnold said. “Can you explain to me what it is you’ve done?”

“I-I dressed up like a man and snuck into the knight cadet training in secret! I apologize sincerely!”

“Good girl.”

Arnold released her, and Rishe collapsed to the ground, finally freed. “Haah...”

Her cheeks felt strange and still hot, but the imprint of Arnold’s cold fingers lingered on them. She laid her own hands over top and breathed in deeply.

Maybe Arnold really *was* enjoying this. He looked down at Rishe—who was more exhausted from this than from her training—and asked, “So? What are you scheming this time?”

“I just wanted to get in better shape.”

“...”

“I mean it!” His suspicion vexed her, but she *had* deceived him. She couldn’t lay blame. “Why did you even come to oversee the training in the first place?”

Arnold paused, then answered with a face devoid of expression. “I heard one of the knight cadets had been referred by Theodore.”

That would be Rishe. It surprised her that Arnold cared whom his brother referred, though. *Prince Theodore said Arnold wouldn’t come to*

the training, but he did! That made Rishe happy, and she couldn't wait to tell Theodore about it. *I wonder how he'll react.*

"Anyway, back to my question."

"Eep!"

"I'll ask again. Why are you doing this?"

"As I said, to get in better shape..."

"That can't be your only reason. There are plenty of other ways to hone your body. You could take on a personal instructor, for instance." Arnold glared down at Rishe where she crouched on the ground. "Let's see... You didn't want anyone pulled from their duties just for your sake. You wanted to see the techniques used in our official training. And you didn't want anyone discriminating based on your gender or social status, so you disguised yourself as a man. From what I know of your thought patterns, that's my best guess."

He's seen right through me!

"I still don't understand, though. Obviously, the training routines are put together based on a man's stamina and strength. You should have known that you'd barely be able to keep up."

He'd even pointed out Rishe's precise initial worry, making it even harder for her to explain herself.

"I...figured this training would be worth it *because* I'm so lacking in stamina and strength."

"Your swordplay revolves around agility and the precision of your strikes. Additional stamina might help you, but you needn't focus on strength training."

Rishe guessed that Arnold wanted to tell her to stop participating in the cadets' training. *Although he isn't demanding it outright.*

Earlier, he'd said he was trying not to break any of his promises to Rishe. That obviously referred to the agreement they'd struck when he proposed to her. Arnold had vowed to grant any of Rishe's wishes if they were in his power.

That's why he's asking me to explain myself. If I can convince him, I'll be allowed to stay until it's over. The only thing Arnold hadn't guessed was Rishe's final reason, which she hadn't even told Theodore, her coconspirator. She had to come clean.

“I understand what you’re saying, Your Highness, but...”

“But?”

Knowing she was being selfish, Rishe hunched over, furrowing her brow as she murmured, “I wanted to try your training regimen...” The words came out sounding sulky, with a note of childishness.

Arnold frowned, but since that one brief duel they’d fought the other day, she felt she knew him much better. In her life as a knight, Rishe had lost to Arnold—an undeniable, absolute defeat. And if someone like that had a plan for new recruits, then she wanted to experience that plan herself.

Wait, that doesn’t actually explain anything!

As he studied her in silence, Rishe sprang to her feet. “I-It’s true that this training might not be a good match, considering my physique, but Count Lawvine knows just what to assign us so we don’t overwork ourselves. The trainees can spar and point out each other’s flaws! I’ve definitely improved over the last few days!”

“...”

“The training *I* know is just pushing yourself until your body breaks, but this week, I’ve learned that it doesn’t have to be that way. If I could only stay for the rest of the sessions, I won’t require a personal instructor—I can just do it on my own!”

“...”

“And that means I won’t ever have to monopolize an instructor for myself!”

Even as she was saying it, it sounded like a weak excuse. Arnold put a hand to his forehead, heaving a sigh.

“P-Prince Arnold?”

“Forget it. I imagine you have no issues with a regimen that *should* be too harsh for you?”

“Of course not! It’s fun, and I’m learning a lot.”

Arnold stared at Rishe, his expression dour as always. After another sigh, he asked, “You haven’t gotten hurt or overly exhausted, have you?”

“No, thanks to Lord Lawvine’s excellent instruction.”

"I heard you sneak out of your room at five in the morning. What time did you go to bed last night?"

"Ugh... I try to get in bed by eleven..." She'd tried to be careful this morning, but it seemed he'd noticed her anyway. Maybe he just let her go because he thought she was tending her field or something. And she *had* been in bed by eleven, but then she'd spent some time memorizing the geography of Galkhein and poring over diplomatic records. She kept that fact to herself.

Arnold thought for a moment, then said slowly, "I have some conditions."

Rishe's eyes went wide. She wasn't expecting this.

"Go to bed one hour earlier. And most importantly, don't let anyone find out you're a woman. Got it?"

Rishe hadn't foreseen him giving in. "You don't mind if I continue?"

Arnold just looked at her and pressed the point, as if he was speaking to a child. "Can you do that for me?"

"Yes! Thank you so much, Prince Arnold!" Suddenly, everything around her seemed brighter.

Arnold sighed for the umpteenth time and asked the overjoyed Rishe, "What do you think of the knights, from the perspective of a cadet?"

"They're wonderful. All the cadets are more than qualified, and Lord Lawvine knows just how to instruct them. He pays careful attention to each and every trainee."

"I see."

"You really value your knights, don't you?" Rishe asked.

Arnold's neutral expression was difficult to read. "People are a country's assets. There's no harm in treating them with respect."

But in a few years, you'll execute Lord Lawvine and send many of those knights out into a war of conquest.

Taking a deep breath, Rishe broached the subject that had been on her mind since the party. "I heard why Prince Kyle is here."

Arnold smiled, looking amused. "So, you *were* listening last night."

“You knew? I was careful to erase all signs of my presence.”

“Partway through. There aren’t many people who can escape my notice for so long.”

Be more careful next time, Rishe chided herself. “How much time does Coyolles have?”

“We didn’t discuss the specifics of their gem mining operation. You must have heard that.”

“Of course. What I want to know is your father’s—His Majesty the Emperor of Galkhein’s—plans.” Her eyes rose to meet his. “You and I were both cautious of Prince Kyle’s reason for visiting, why he’s really here. I’m sure that your father was much the same.”

Rishe knew hardly anything about the emperor, but last night, Arnold had described him as someone who’d prefer conquering another country to allying with one. And even if that weren’t true, she knew very well that he’d wanted his son to marry a foreigner out of desire for a political hostage.

“Unfortunately, I have no idea how much my father knows. But whenever he finds out, I have no doubt he’ll make a move before Coyolles is claimed by another nation. The country has no value, but we need the sea routes to the north.”

As she suspected, the situation was bad. Whatever moves she made to improve relations between Coyolles and Galkhein would have to escape the emperor’s notice. In that case, her timeline was compressed—she didn’t have years to plan.

“I know what you’re thinking...” Arnold took a step toward Rishe with a beautiful, somber smile on his face. “But if the alternative is *that man* invading them, I think it’d be better if I did it.”

Rishe gasped, goose bumps forming on her back. “What are you saying...?”

“You want to persuade me to make peace with Coyolles, but they’re worthless to us. Even if you *do* manage to stop me, what if my father finds out about their predicament? That would be worse than if I’d made the first move.” Arnold watched Rishe, seemingly amused by her reactions. “Coyolles is doomed—now we’re just squabbling over who finishes them off. If Kyle had stayed put, he could have bought his country another couple of years. Yet he came seeking aid like a fool...”

Anyone would take advantage of that.”

“Prince Arnold.”

“It’ll be too late once my father finds out. If you have compassion for the people of Coyolles, then you should help me invade them.”

His tone was jovial, but Rishe didn’t doubt that he was serious. If she’d just met him, Rishe would have been terrified—but now she knew better.

“You’re a real liar sometimes, Your Highness,” she said sadly. “If you really preferred conquest to diplomacy, you wouldn’t have bothered swearing troublesome oaths to me. You would have just made me your wife by force.”

Arnold scowled.

“I don’t know why you wanted to marry me, but I’m just some duke’s daughter from a politically weak country. You could have just taken me, but you didn’t. Even after I came here, you continued to treat me with respect.”

He was doing the same thing now. His “conditions” for Rishe’s training were only out of concern for her. Why would a man like that choose this future? Rishe peered into his eyes, but they held no answers. His vast, oceanic irises glowed with a dusky light that gradually faded away.

“You’re free to think whatever you want about me,” Arnold said as he slowly backed away from her. “But remember this: In my country, war is not some terrible last resort. It’s just politics.”

Rishe first visited Coyolles in her first life as a merchant. Even Coyolles had a summer, however short, and it was in that season that she arrived. On the night of a terrible thunderstorm, she and Tully reached the lakeside town of Coyolles Castle, almost getting stranded on the way. Their overcoats were practically useless in the downpour. Only after being guided to a back door and handed some towels by a maid were they finally able to relax.

“Ha ha ha ha! People warned me about the rain, but I never expected it to be *that* bad!” Tully burst into laughter, slicking back his drenched hair. “This is why I said you didn’t have to come with me, Rishe. I was the one who decided to push forward with our business to

avoid delay. You should've just stayed at the inn with the others."

"There are more important things to think about, Mr. Tully! If it rains so much in the summer, don't you think we could sell raincoats? They'd be thinner and lighter than winter coats, and the designs could be brighter and cooler too!"

"That's a great suggestion, but do you even care what you look like right now? You did your hair up all nice, but you were so preoccupied with protecting the merchandise that your hairdo and your dress got demolished."

"Well, drying off a *person* is easy—one just needs a towel."

"Ha ha!" Tully laughed, his eyes fixed on Rishe. "I'm impressed you kept up with me, newbie. My regular customer here will really appreciate your determination."

"Your regular customer? Ugh, I really can't be in the castle looking like this, can I? We made the delivery on time, so I'll just go..."

Before Rishe could finish, Tully smirked and sketched a bow. "It's been too long, Your Highness."

Following his lead, Rishe quickly dipped into a deep curtsy. *Your Highness? Does he mean...?*

Footsteps approached, halting just before reaching them.

"Long time no see, Tully. Sorry to rush you here in this weather."

"I'm just grateful for the opportunity to see you. That said, I hope you'll pardon our unseemly appearances."

"It was my father the king who requested delivery as quickly as possible. I'll have a change of clothes and some hot water ready for you right away. And who is this?"

"She works for me," Tully said. "Her name is Weitzner."

"I'll have to offer my respects."

Had a member of the royal family really come all the way here—to the back entrance—just to meet a simple merchant?

"I'm honored to make your acquaintance. My name is Rishe Irmgard Weitzner." Rishe introduced herself, her head still bowed. Drops of water fell from her hair, wetting the floor. The next thing she knew, the prince knelt on that wet floor without a moment's hesitation.

“I am Kyle Morgan Cleverly. I wish to extend my most heartfelt welcome.”

“P-pardon me, Your Highness?!” Rishe almost screamed. Was this Coyolles’s culture of men showing intense respect to women? That was Rishe’s first thought, but she quickly learned the truth.

“Coming here in the rain while protecting your horses and carriage must have been difficult. Not to mention the perilous sea journey before that. This country has few valuable resources; only with the support of merchants like you are our citizens allowed to live such blessed lives.” The prince, with eyes like water, stared right at Rishe. “I extend to you my utmost respect and gratitude.”

That was their first meeting. Kyle was royalty, but he had a great deal of respect for people from all walks of life—his servants, the knights who protected him, the citizens of his country, old people, and even children far younger than him. Rishe hadn’t just witnessed this in her life as a merchant either.

When Rishe was an apothecary, he’d dragged his sickly body to the port to meet her.

“So, you’re Hakurei’s student. Her letters told me you have a promising career ahead of you.”

In her life as an alchemist, he hadn’t dismissed their practice as suspicious like the rest of the world. Instead, he earnestly listened as Rishe and Michel had told him their ambitions.

“I never imagined Michel would take on a student,” he’d said then. “I know the sort of mischief he gets up to. Still, I’m overjoyed to have such talented alchemists in my humble country. I beseech you, please share your wisdom with us.”

He always sat down and conversed with people at eye level, doing his best to understand their positions. Kyle was never arrogant, fulfilling his duties as a ruler to the best of his abilities.

She’d probably spent the most time with him in her life as an alchemist. After Rishe met Michel and became his student, the two of them sailed to Coyolles. There, they’d studied a variety of subjects under Kyle’s tutelage—the prince was, incidentally, in charge of his nation’s academic policies. Even his scolding was fond; he spoke to them like a guardian would.

“Michel, don’t you remember what I just told you the other day? Yet you *still* haven’t cleaned this room?”

One day, Kyle sat Michel down on the couch, standing in front of him with his arms crossed as if Michel wasn’t his elder.

“The other scholars are complaining about you. One of them said you came in covered in blood and then shut yourself in your room. He was *terrified*. What in the world were you studying this time? You completely sullied the carpet!”

Michel frowned and turned to Rishe, who was sitting next to him. “What did I do, Rishe? I don’t remember. Did that really happen?”

“You don’t remember, Professor? You said you helped with the birth of a calf and got a research specimen in exchange.”

Michel’s face lit up. “Ahh, that!”

Kyle stared Michel down, a complicated look on his face. “That’s not all. You spend days in your lab and don’t return to your quarters. You left uneaten food out, and now the place smells like rotten eggs.”

“Ah ha ha. The weather’s been so good lately.”

While Michel experienced the consequences of his actions, his student bowed her head in his place. “I’m sorry, Prince Kyle. We’ll be more careful in the future. We’ll make sure not to do research in soiled clothes, and we’ll eat all the food we’re served! I swear, never again will he eat the flowers in the garden because getting food is too much trouble for him.”

“Wait, I haven’t heard that one! Besides, Michel’s not the only one I’m getting complaints about.”

“Huh?” Rishe blurted out. She looked up to see Kyle glaring at her this time.

“It’s you too, Weitzner. You’re hoarding so many books, one scholar is worried the stone floor will give out. Could you consider moving them out when you’ve finished reading them?”

“What?! Um, I—”

“I believe we’ve already spoken about you stacking books taller than your own height. That’s dangerous! What if they collapsed in an earthquake or something?”

“I have no excuse...”

Despite this, every book in her room was valuable, and she wasn't done learning from them. She'd read some of them so many times that she could recite their contents from memory. Depending on when she picked them up, however, she could make new breakthroughs on her rereads.

I'm just freeloading here. I can't cause trouble for the castle. But I don't know how to prioritize which books to keep and which to get rid of! I'll have to spend at least another two weeks—no, three weeks—reading them all from cover to cover one last time...

"And that's why I'll be opening up one of my rooms for you two to use as an archive."

"I'm sorry, Prince Kyle, give me just one month to consider—wait, what?!" Rishe was baffled. "Are you sure? All the books in my room pertain to alchemy, so I'm the only one who'd use them. I wouldn't want to take up a whole room..."

People tended to view alchemists as crackpots who sucked up time and funds without producing results. Michel had been invited to Coyolles not for his alchemy knowledge but for his expertise on other subjects, like medicine. Kyle had no reason to respect Michel and Rishe as alchemists.

Yet he met their eyes with an unwavering will and said without hesitation, "It's my duty to support you, and I intend to do so without compromise."

"Oh, Prince Kyle..."

That wasn't the end of it either—Kyle helped Rishe and Michel countless times after that.

"You two were so focused on your research that you forgot to eat again, didn't you?! Wait, it's fine, you don't need to get up. Keep watching your flasks; just eat this bread for now. But drink water first!"

"If you need research funds, I can negotiate with my father. I know you two will produce results. I'll convince him."

"It went well? I see. Congratulations. Above all, I'm glad to see your hard work rewarded."

Immersed deep in her memories as she sat in a room in Galkhein's palace, Rishe thought, *Prince Kyle always treated me kindly in every life,*

so I have to—

“Rishe.”

Michel called her name, and she looked up. After Arnold gave her permission to continue her training, Rishe had spent her afternoon visiting the tower quarters of the scholars from Coyolles.

“I looked over it. The focus is very interesting; I’m curious to see the results.”

“Thank you, Professor Michel.”

On the table between them sat a research paper Rishe had written in the few days since she’d reunited with Michel. It was an idea she’d only half completed in her life as an alchemist. She thought it might be useful for her war avoidance plan and wanted to hear Michel’s opinion on it.

“It’s all verified up to a certain point,” he told her.

“I dabbled back home, but I had to stop when I came to this country to get married.” Rishe mixed some lies with the truth. In reality, she’d died in the middle of her research. As her knight guards watched over them, Rishe asked him several questions.

Michel the scholar is one of Coyolles’s greatest weapons right now, but he’s not enough. If Galkhein wanted him, they’d just pluck him from Kyle instead of forming an alliance.

There was another reason she didn’t want Michel and Arnold meeting again. Remembering her parting with Michel, she clenched her hands into fists.

“Say, Rishe.” Michel put the paper down and smiled softly. “Do you like learning?”

“Yes, I love it! I get excited learning anything new, whatever it is. It feels like my world expands, and everything I’ve seen up to that point suddenly looks different.”

“Heh heh, I know what you mean. Learning is fun—especially when you can apply what you’ve learned. I’m sure about this now...” Michel put his chin in his hand, grin widening. “You’re not suited to being an empress.”

One of her knight guards opened his mouth to protest, but Rishe silenced him with a glance. Michel didn’t mean anything by it.

He continued sunnily, “Well, it’s true, isn’t it? You’re better suited to the freedom to go wherever you want and try whatever you want. I think you should be living that kind of life.”

“Professor...”

“You should just come with me.” He cocked his head, blond hair spilling over his shoulder. “Then you could learn a bunch of new stuff. I’ll teach you anything you want to know.”

“I appreciate the invitation.” Rishe looked out the window. Far in the distance, she saw the detached wing where she and Arnold lived. Arnold would be there now, having returned to his work. “However, I’m working to understand one *particular* subject at present.”

“Arnold Hein, huh?”

She flinched.

Michel cast his eyes down, the shadows of his long lashes falling on his cheeks. “I’m interested in him too. He rejected Kyle’s request, but the way he did it piqued my curiosity. I’d love to give him a certain compound and see what happens...”

“O-oh.” Rishe felt clammy sweat breaking out on her skin.

“I call it gunpowder.” There was a darkness in Michel’s eyes as he looked at Rishe. “Heh heh... I’m sure your husband would make great use of it.”

Chapter 5

RISHE ONLY LET HER UNEASE show on her face for a split second. She quickly erased it with a smile. “I’d be very interested in an experiment involving Prince Arnold.” She feigned genuine zeal, hoping Michel couldn’t tell how fast her heart was beating.

The “gunpowder” Michel had invented had the power to destroy anything and everything. The first time she’d witnessed its might, she’d barely believed her eyes. His experiment burst apart a small room from the inside, its stone walls crumbling in an instant. Ever since then, Michel had been searching for someone willing to use his gunpowder, and his student Rishe had hoped with all her being that no one would ever take him up on it. But he’d finally found someone—the worst candidate Rishe could imagine.

“I never expected to find such an incredible possibility here.” Michel’s voice dropped to a gentle whisper. He knew exactly how sound traveled at this volume, so Rishe was sure her knights would barely hear anything. “My gunpowder must go to someone with real power to use it in war. I’ve been investigating policies of many different nations’ leaders, but Galkhein’s emperor always seemed too emotional in the records—annoying, even. I never thought his son, the crown prince, would be suited to my experiments either. After all, his policies are those of a ‘good ruler.’”

He smiled softly and tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. Careful not to show her agitation, Rishe asked casually, “What sort of person were you looking for, Professor?”

In this life, maybe Michel would tell her. She looked at him, willing him to answer. His smile grew.

“Neither tyrannical kings nor virtuous ones suit my experiment. I prematurely judged Galkhein’s emperor and crown prince as the same. How rash of me.”

That’s why Michel never had any contact with Prince Arnold in any of my previous lives. As emperor, Arnold Hein never used Michel’s gunpowder in his war. If he’d known of its existence, Rishe was sure he would’ve used it to maximize his efficiency, just like he’d used the

pocket watch he'd lent her to carry out his strategies.

Michel has no interest in rumors. He trusted the results of Arnold's political policies over the gossip around his cruelty. And once Arnold became emperor, he ruled him out for the same reason as the current emperor—Arnold's father.

But now, Michel had met the real Arnold.

"Prince Arnold is a very virtuous ruler!" Rishe said, forcing a smile. "I know how he seems, but he's a kind person. He ensured his people didn't become impoverished because of the war, and he's even come up with his own training methods to prevent his knights from sustaining injuries."

Rishe kept up her feigned cheer as she chose her words carefully. "He puts up with my selfishness too. Just the other day, I lost a bet and had to do whatever he asked me. Instead of giving me orders, he just bought me a ring! Ha ha, isn't that wonderful?"

She tried to pass it off as a woman boasting about her fiancé—and not like she was trying to convince Michel of anything. "If he said something to Prince Kyle, I doubt he meant it. I don't think he's the one you're looking for."

"Say, Rishe." Michel smiled bewitchingly at her. "Can you formally introduce me to your husband?"

After a beat of hesitation, Rishe nodded, her smile still neutral. "Of course. I'll see if he can make the time soon."

"Let's just go see him now. If he's as nice as you say he is, I'm sure he'll be fine with it."

"Professor Michel, I'm not sure that—"

"Ahh, I know. You don't *want* me to meet him, do you?" Michel chuckled at Rishe, who'd jolted at his words. "You'll do then, Rishe. I'm just about as interested in you as I am in Arnold Hein."

"You must be joking. There's no reason for you to be interested in me."

"That's not true. I mean..." He fixed her with a stare. "You've never once asked me what gunpowder is."

At once, she realized her blunder. Her efforts to not come off as overly surprised had backfired.

“I’d like to study you. If you agree, I could see myself being satisfied enough to not bother with Arnold Hein... Oh, I’m sorry for being so cruel. But this is my duty.”

“Your duty?”

“Yes. Something poisonous is only valuable when it kills someone, thereby fulfilling its duty. My value is much the same.” Michel’s smile never faltered. “Someone who was brought into this world to make a mess of it must do as his duty commands. I was granted my alchemical abilities for that very reason.”

A sweet, floral scent hung in the air: the smell of Michel’s herbal cigarettes.

“I’ve been looking for something like that—something to flip the world on its head and shake everything loose. I’ve been searching for that capacity in a ruler for *such* a long time.”

Rishe strode through the halls of the palace with her guards. Her “lesson” with Michel had been cut short when Kyle sent for him. Michel had just grinned and said, “See you tomorrow, Rishe,” leaving the room like nothing had happened.

She felt the urge to sigh as she made her way down the hall. *I’m sure Michel will do whatever he can to meet with Prince Arnold now. And Prince Arnold will surely listen to what he has to say. I’ve spent enough time with him to know he’s very open to new technologies and ideas.*

If Arnold found out about gunpowder, and she couldn’t prevent the outbreak of war, she knew exactly what would happen. *I can’t let Prince Arnold get his hands on it. I’ve also got to improve our relations with Coyolles as soon as possible.*

Lost in thought, Rishe hardly paid attention to her surroundings. As a result, she failed to notice the hand reaching out from a nearby hallway and yanking her around.

“Ack! Prince Theodore!”

He must have been on his way back from some official business. He was wearing a cloak for going out in, frowning at Rishe. Without

him even saying anything, Rishe knew the source of this perturbed expression.

“He found out about your cross-dressing?”

“I-I’m so sorry!”

Theodore let Rishe go and folded his arms, looking down at her. Thankfully, he was speaking quietly enough that Rishe’s guards couldn’t overhear. All she could do was apologize earnestly.

“Really, I’m sorry. And you helped me out too...”

“Well, if he found out, there’s nothing you can really do about it. Besides, my brother’s difficult whether he is or isn’t fooled. It’s fine. More importantly, how did he react? You have to at least tell me that! And why was he at the training anyway?! He’s never done that before! I was out in the slums on business when I heard. I was on pins and needles all the way back.”

“Oh, about that...” Rishe told Theodore that Arnold had come to the training to see the candidate his brother had recommended. Afterward, Theodore was silent for a good several seconds. He then covered his face and hung his head.

“What is it, Prince Theodore?”

“Yeah, no, I can’t really digest that information right now, so I’m not going to think about it. You’ll have to tell me about it again some other time...”

Er, he seems overwhelmed. So much had passed between them over the years that he was having trouble processing this. Theodore was practically hunched over on the ground now.

Looking to change the subject, Rishe asked, “You were all the way out in the slums, yet you heard right away that Prince Arnold was observing the training?”

“My retainers are good at their jobs. I have a perfect information network set up—even if I’m out in town, I get news of my brother right away,” Theodore said, deadly serious. All the power of a prince, and he’d finely honed it to be his brother’s keeper.

The “retainers” he mentioned were likely not palace guards. He was probably referring to people from the slums who were in his debt and other such ruffians.

“And it’s not just my brother. I’ve looked into all the trainees. I’m watching them to see how they spend their time in town, making sure none of them pick up any odd habits to amuse themselves.”

“I see. So the prince is watching over the baby knights from the shadows.”

“Well, there’s that too.” When Rishe tilted her head, Theodore reluctantly admitted, “I’m sending my sister-in-law into their midst. If anyone strange was among them, and something happened to her, what could I say to my brother?”

Rishe was surprised to hear he was doing all this for her. “Thank you for your concern. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“I’m not really worried about you. Everything I do, I do for my brother, *obviously*.”

“Heh. I know. Well then, Prince Theodore...” Rishe found herself smiling, but she schooled her expression and looked up. “I don’t suppose I could borrow these skilled retainers of yours for a time, could I?”

Theodore’s eyes widened. “For something that will help my brother?”

“No. In fact, this would be more like betraying him.”

Theodore’s lips instantly curled into an impish smile. “Interesting... Sure, I’m in.”

“We have a deal, then.”

With that, the sister- and brother-in-law quietly came to an agreement.

After parting with Theodore, Rishe penned several quick letters and handed them off to a servant. She had dinner by herself, tended her field, and checked on her maids. Then she took a bath and returned to her room. When her hair was dry, she dismissed her attendant, leaving herself alone. Sitting in the one chair in her room, she took a moment to catch her breath.

Naturally, Michel was the first thing that came to mind. In her life

as an alchemist, he had taken her all the way to the far north of Coyolles.

“Thank you so much, Professor! I never thought I’d see an aurora like that!”

It began with a single insignificant comment. Auroras were visible in Coyolles, but Rishe had never seen one before in either of her previous lives.

“Well, it was the perfect opportunity. It’s easiest to see them when the nighttime temperature rapidly drops after a few warm days. We should hurry—it’s probably going to rain in a few hours.”

Walking across a snowy field, Michel took out a corked glass bottle containing a special mixture he’d made himself. Normally, the liquid was clear, but it crystallized into something like snow when the weather worsened. The device wasn’t precise enough to present to the royal family, but it came in handy in Michel and Rishe’s daily life. She was of the same mind; they needed to make their way home soon.

“Rishe, did you get any ideas for the project you were stuck on?”

“Yes, I did!”

Michel smiled, a lantern swaying in his hand. “Good.”

Rishe was wearing a fur coat, but Michel—sensitive to the cold—was bundled up far more than she was. He was in so many layers, it looked hard to move.

“I’m sorry, Professor. You had to come all this way for me.”

“Why are you apologizing? You’re my student, aren’t you?” Michel cocked his head, his breath coming out white. “I’ll show you whatever you want to see. If there’s something you don’t know, I’ll do my utmost to teach you. Although if you want to figure it out for yourself, I won’t get in your way.”

Whenever other people witnessed this, they always reacted with shock. “Michel Hévin doesn’t think about anything but his research. He doesn’t care about other people at all.” That was the popular public consensus, but the reality was different.

“Why do you take such good care of me, Professor? If you didn’t have a student, you could focus more on your own research.”

Walking down the snow-cleared path, Michel stroked his chin. "Perhaps...because it's the only 'good' thing I'll ever do in my life." His quiet words were sucked away into the snowy landscape. "But you don't need to worry about that. Just learn a lot, absorb a lot, and grow big and tall!"

"Professor, I'm not going to grow any taller than this."

"Huh? Are you already at that age? Nothing to be done about that, I suppose." He turned back to Rishe and gave her a truly kind smile. "I'm looking forward to witnessing the scholar you become."

Those words were probably heartfelt on Michel's part. He cared for Kyle and many of the people of Coyolles as well. He wasn't hostile, and his desire to experiment with his gunpowder wasn't out of any sort of ill will or cruelty. That was why it was so difficult to do anything about him.

He told me that if I left this country and went with him, he wouldn't meet with Prince Arnold. Michel had said it with an apology and a smile.

Rishe's thoughts spiraled. She took a deep breath, slowly opening her eyes, and when she did...she saw something strange on the balcony, beyond her open curtains.

Light?

She raised her head, watching a small bead of light float through the space. Realizing what it was, Rishe leapt from her chair and rushed out onto the balcony in her nightdress.

"Wow...!"

All around her were little bugs in flight, like fragments of stars dancing in the air. Rishe watched them, her eyes sparkling. In one of her past lives, she'd become very familiar with creatures like this, and she could tell exactly what species they were from the characteristics of their light.

These are leto fireflies. They're so beautiful. These terrestrial fireflies could fly to high altitudes. It was a relatively common sight on this continent, but when she saw so many of them up close, she had to appreciate the experience.

It's such a waste to watch them by myself, but the maids are bathing right now. My only other option would be...

Rishe snuck a glance at the neighboring room. Just then, she heard a door open, and the very man she'd been thinking of stepped out onto his own balcony. Their eyes met.

"G-good evening."

"Indeed."

Rishe felt a little awkward, remembering what had happened earlier that day. Arnold, on the other hand, seemed wholly unbothered. With the same cool look on his face as always, he glanced from Rishe to the little lights flitting around outside. His sword was in his hand.

"What are these?"

"They're fireflies."

"Fireflies." Arnold tested the—perhaps unfamiliar—word. He thought for a moment and then said, "I can order them exterminated, if you'd like."

"What?! Why?!"

"Flies are insects, right?"

Rishe was astonished by his emotionless suggestion. She couldn't comprehend the leap from "insects" to "extermination," disregarding the beautiful lights the creatures gave off.

"Sure, we'll need some insect repellent, but you can't just indiscriminately cull them! All animals, humans included, are part of a larger system. If you eliminate too many of any one species, it affects all the other living things around them."

Rishe ran over to the railing in her haste to persuade him. The balconies of the two rooms weren't connected; even when she pressed up against the rail, there was still some distance between them.

"Besides, it may be selfish human sentiment, but...please, take a look." She pointed at the fireflies drawing trails of light in the air, smiling at Arnold. "See? Aren't they beautiful?"

Arnold was silent for a moment, just looking at Rishe, before he let out a small breath. "I guess you're right."

She was sincerely glad that he understood, even if that gladness was somewhat undercut. *This is so strange. All my current worries stem from Prince Arnold.*

Nevertheless, the two of them stood on their balconies, watching

the fireflies together. Her eyes followed one light as it danced its way from her to Arnold.

“They seem to like you, don’t they?” She was a little jealous.

Arnold smiled teasingly. “Why don’t you just come to my room, then?”

Oh, that makes sense.

“I suppose I shall. It’s only about a half-meter jump.”

Before Arnold could question her, Rishe lifted her skirt, grabbed the railing, and climbed up.

“Hey, you’re not really going to—”

Arnold was saying something, but she’d just ask him to repeat it when she was over there. Her mind made, she sprang into the air. Leaping from one railing to the other was nothing for Rishe. All she had to do was land well and then jump down to Arnold. However...

“Eep!”

The moment she landed, Arnold caught her protectively. There was a loud clatter, most likely the sound of Arnold’s sword falling to the floor. He’d thrown it aside to catch her. She thought her heart would stop.



“Prince...Arnold...” Rishe barely managed to squeeze her voice from her throat. Her heart was clanging like an alarm bell. And how couldn’t it be? She was trapped in the circle of Arnold’s arms. “Erm, I...”

For some reason, he wasn’t letting her go.

Flustered, she stammered, “I-I’m sorry if I surprised you, but, um...” She clutched at the prince’s jacket. As much as she wanted to look him in the eyes when she spoke, she didn’t think she could raise her head right now. “You had to know I could make a jump like that.”

“I guess you’re right. I *have* seen you jump from a balcony to the ground before.”

“Then why did you...?”

Arnold was silent for a time. Then, sounding embarrassed, he said, “My body acted on its own. I couldn’t help it.”

Rishe balked at the unexpected answer. He usually wore a bold smile when catching her off guard with his words, but now he seemed reluctant—almost sulky. Whenever he treated her differently than usual, it threw her for a loop.

As soon as he loosened his hold on her, Rishe pulled awkwardly away. Then she gasped, hurrying to pick up Arnold’s sword. He’d thrown it away for her sake, but that didn’t make a swordsman’s blade any less precious.

“Thank you.” Arnold accepted the proffered sword with a slightly complex expression, then looked away from Rishe. She wondered if he was feeling awkward as well. “Why did you even jump in the first place? You could have just come through the door, no?” He seemed to be trying to deflect attention from his discomfort.

Rishe blinked. “Through the door?”

“Through the door.”

“Instead of jumping from the balcony?”

“That’s right.”

She considered the logic of his words and came to one conclusion: “You’re right!”

A snorting laugh crept out of Arnold. When he raised his head, it was to give Rishe a very soft, teasing look. “You’re always taking the

shortest route, aren't you?"

"I have no idea what you mean!" She did, of course, but she played dumb all the same.

Arnold was astoundingly open-minded when it came to Rishe. He never got fed up or scolded her, never tried to persuade her to act the part of the crown princess. Instead, he watched her as if it brought him joy to do so.

Before, I always figured he was just messing with me for his own entertainment.

What a strange person he was. She didn't say it aloud—he wouldn't want to hear that from her.

"By the way, why did you have your sword out, Your Highness?"

He looked up at the glowing insects around them. "The lights looked like torches to me."

It made sense. Fireflies flickered at regular intervals, with the streaks of light moving, cutting out, and then lighting up again. *Now that he mentions it, they do resemble torchlights on a battlefield.* Specifically, they looked like the torches of a scouting party moving through the shadows, drawing closer. The resemblance wasn't perfect, though, especially here inside the palace walls. He should have realized right away that his worries were unfounded, but he'd picked up his sword on instinct.

His memories of the war must have a firm hold on him. Had she herself not lived as a knight, Rishe likely wouldn't have understood his actions. In fact, she might've even feared his intentions and kept her distance. But the Rishe who was standing here right now was different—she *did* understand.

"If it were me," she began, pointing toward the palace walls somewhere in the darkness, "I'd station archers in intervals along that side. I'd place a bell at every interval so they could warn of intruders or other dangers." She looked up at the man who had once been her enemy and challenged him with a smile.

Arnold's surprise lasted only for a moment before he grinned and shot back, "The sound would be a deterrent, but archers aren't much of a threat. Every single one of them are obsessed with knightly virtues. They're only good for support. They're not well trained, and there's a

limit to how accurately they can shoot.”

“Ugh... I guess you’re right.”

“I investigate my targets beforehand, but I’ve never pulled my troops back from mere archers.”

As far as Rishe knew, only the eastern continent valued archers’ skills. Without at least a foundational level of respect, few if any would master the art in Galkhein. In her life as a knight, Arnold hadn’t been intimidated in the least by their archers. As the side being invaded, she wished he’d learned to practice caution.

“If your palace is a battlefield, then you’re on the defensive,” Arnold said. “An inferior position. How would you handle that?”

“Well, if you were the enemy general, I’d purposely create a break in our defensive line, drawing you in.”

“Oh? You’d invite the enemy inside?”

“But you’d be too cautious,” Rishe went on. “You wouldn’t charge straight in, would you? I could win if I could maintain my resistance of the siege; my main directive would be to never give the enemy the impression that my position is inferior. I’d make you think I was lying in wait instead of fleeing; I would show myself to you openly.”

“Interesting.” In the dancing lights of the fireflies, Arnold put his elbow on the balcony railing. “Your most crucial detail would be the number of troops. The south side of the palace is the least defensible. What would you do there?”

“I’d be forced to utilize the environment. Set traps, for instance...”

Arnold had no end of battle tactics with which to oppose her. Rishe thought and made suggestions, and Arnold quickly tore through them. Watching the beautiful lights, Rishe felt her frustration building.

“Is there some endless spring of battle tactics inside of you, Prince Arnold?” she asked him at last.

“I wish. Tactics naturally sprout from people’s weaknesses.”

“Weaknesses...”

“Even when attacking a fortress—a campaign that can lead to massive casualties—you can easily exploit an enemy’s weakness. Capture the country’s women and children and slaughter them in front of the castle walls, for instance, and the enemy soldiers will run out on

their own to save them. Ideas like that aren't hard to conjure up."

Wide-eyed, Rishe blinked. She couldn't read any emotion from the prince's profile as he gazed at the fireflies. "You hate war, don't you?"

Arnold furrowed his brow and looked down at her. "A normal person would have the opposite impression, I believe."

"Really? I don't think someone who likes war would look the way you do now."

She smiled at him, and his frown deepened. Rishe's eyes trailed after a firefly as it drifted closer. The bead of light blinked, faintly illuminating Arnold's hair and features. Rishe could almost see stardust in the prince's blue eyes. His azure irises, so like the sea, fixed her in place and stole her heart even more than the wondrous glint of the fireflies. She found herself muttering, "You really do have beautiful eyes..."

She'd said it without thinking, but it seemed to annoy him. Arnold's gaze fell, calling attention to his long lashes. "These eyes match my father's," he said, voice unsteady. "They're proof that I am the emperor's son. When I was a child, there were times when I wanted to gouge them out of my skull."

"Oh, Your Highness..."

Arnold looked at Rishe and spoke to her quietly, sincerely, as if these were simple facts. "They aren't 'beautiful.' Don't look at them like they hold any value."

His words lanced Rishe's heart. Arnold looked away from her, gazing out into the firefly-lit darkness toward the capital city. In the daytime, they could see the city streets from their balconies, but now all was silent and dark.

"On the day you arrived, you told me you'd always wanted to come to this country."

"Yes. And when I went down to the town, I realized what an amazing place it was."

"I can't value the same things you do. I see the lights of insects as the fires of war, and the town you fondly gaze down upon sometimes disgusts me." Arnold sucked in a breath. "Maybe it's because I have my father's eyes. Or maybe he and I are one in the same at our cores. Either way, it's unsightly."

Arnold wore nearly the same neutral expression he always did, but Rishe could sense the emotions simmering beneath his words.

“Do you remember when I treated the knights with an antidote on our journey here?” she asked him, and Arnold looked back at her. “You extolled their virtues then, Your Highness. And you only knew those virtues because you observed them up close, right? Everything else you see is the same way.”

Slowly, she went on, “Are the lights you see in the distance the fires of war, or are they the beautiful glimmer of fireflies? Your perspective isn’t an immutable thing passed down to you from your parents but something you build up by experience. All you need to do is learn. You have plenty of time to see the beauty of this country, to learn about wonderful creatures like fireflies.”

Rishe held Arnold’s blue-eyed gaze as she spoke, hiding the pain in her heart with a bright smile. She fervently held back from patting his head like he was a child. “I’m sure you’ll find plenty of beauty and things you value in the future.”

“Hah.” With a self-deprecating laugh, Arnold retorted, “I don’t need anything like that. All I need is what is necessary to achieve my goals. Everything else can be eliminated, tossed aside on my way up.”

“But, Your High—”

“I killed someone important to me with my own hands. If you get in my way, I’ll toss you aside as well.”

Theodore had told her that Arnold killed his own mother. Maybe that was what he was referring to.

“I don’t know what you’re planning with this Coyolles business, but...” Arnold laced his tone with cruelty. “Don’t make me get rid of you.”

Rishe pressed her lips together, but not because she was afraid. *It’s like he’s pleading with me. Why?* If he truly only desired that which allowed him to reach his goals, why would he sound so plaintive?

Then, she made up her mind. “I can’t promise you that. Even if I become your wife, I’ll still act for myself—for my own goals. I won’t give that up even if it means you getting rid of me. However...” Rishe thrust her chest out and declared, “Toss me aside all you want. I’ll just come back.”

“What?”

“If you drive me out and break our engagement, I’ll just apply as a maid and come right back to this palace.”

Arnold’s eyes went wide. Rishe smiled, feeling like she’d pulled off a successful prank. “If that doesn’t work, I’ll cross-dress and join the knights. If that doesn’t work, I’ll come here as an apothecary. I’ll acquire any and all skills to allow me access and grant me the power to see you.”

When she’d first come to this country, it was with the knowledge that she might one day be divorced and driven out. She had several strategies planned out to still have a life afterward. But right now, what Rishe wanted more than anything was to remain at Arnold’s side here in the palace.

“So please don’t worry. I won’t let you get rid of me so easily.”

As she made her declaration, Rishe came to a decision. *I know what I need to do for Prince Arnold.* She had to change his perspective, make him see new sides of the world. In order to do that, there were things she needed to show him. And maybe not just Arnold...

“I’m sorry, Your Highness.” Rishe reached out to him, took his face in her hands, and peered deeply into his eyes. She knew it was rude to touch him like this, but she couldn’t stop herself. “I don’t know the emperor. To me, these are not your father’s eyes; they’re your eyes. They may be hateful to you, but I’ll say it as many times as I must.” She looked into that frozen sea and smiled. “I think you have the most beautiful eyes in the world.”

Arnold scowled. She didn’t want to force her own perspective onto him; if he truly despised his eyes, she wouldn’t invalidate those feelings. But she wanted him to understand how she felt too.

The prince hung his head, putting his hands over Rishe’s, wearing his usual inscrutable expression. It soon melted into something much kinder, and he said, “It’s late. You should get to bed.”

He gently removed Rishe’s hands from his face. Rishe let go, although she didn’t want to. She disguised her feelings by quietly telling him, “Good night, Prince Arnold.”

“Yeah.”

It was then that she realized she couldn’t see the fireflies any

longer.

Rishe went back to her own balcony and turned around, but Arnold had already gone inside his room. Her nightdress fluttered in the evening air. The night view seemed lonelier when she was gazing out at it without him.

He wanted to gouge his eyes out. Arnold's words were replete with his animosity and disgust for his father. But simple discord between father and son couldn't explain the depths of Arnold's hatred for the color of his eyes.

Back in her room, Rishe went to her bed and took out the paper she'd hidden under her pillow. On it was the design of the ring Arnold planned to purchase for her. Rishe had spent several nights looking at it before she went to sleep. Eventually, she tucked the paper away again and moved to her desk. Checking the pocket watch she'd borrowed from Arnold, she picked up a quill.

"I apologize for disturbing you so late at night, my lord." Arnold's attendant Oliver bowed to his prince in his office. In his hands, Arnold held the document Oliver had just given him.

"It's fine. I was just about to call you to discuss this."

Oliver's brows scrunched; he hadn't expected that. "Are you planning to act? I'm aware of what needs to be done, but it's a bit premature, don't you think?"

"That's exactly why we do it now. He thinks the same way," Arnold said, his eyes cold. "I've factored in the potential losses to my plan."

Chapter 6

“**Y**OU GOT a minute, Lu?”

At early training that day, Fritz timidly called out to Rishe. She felt her smile freeze on her face. Sven, who was training with them, was off drawing water from the well. None of the other cadets had arrived yet, so it was just Fritz and the cross-dressing Rishe.

Fritz had been acting strange all morning. His sword swings lacked strength, and he seemed out of it, like he was lost in thought. And Rishe had an idea why.

“Er, about yesterday’s training...”

I knew it. He’s been stressing about it this whole time. Fritz had witnessed her talking to Arnold, whom he idolized, the day before. *Plus, he saw the prince holding me against the wall and pinching my cheeks...*

Rishe’s eyes glazed over as Fritz shot her an awkward look. He earnestly searched for the words to say, haltingly telling her, “If this is an insensitive question, go ahead and just punch me. Yesterday, you and Prince Arnold...”

“Oh, yes. I had something stuck in my eye, and Prince Arnold got it out for me!”

“Huh?”

While Fritz gaped, Rishe smoothly explained, “It was windy yesterday, right? Something got in my eye, and I yelled about it. Prince Arnold came to see what was wrong. You could have talked to him while he was there, but you ran off so fast!”

“Y-your eye? You got something in your eye?” Fritz went quiet, and Rishe tried to not let her nervousness show. Would he buy it?

She gulped at the same time Fritz opened his mouth again.

“Wow, Lu! I can’t believe you got Prince Arnold to help you like that!”

Th-thank goodness! Rishe’s knees almost gave out.

Fritz looked significantly more cheerful, not to mention relieved. “I see, so you had something in your eye. That’s all it was, huh?”

Well, he does look up to Prince Arnold. I'm sure he didn't want to see his hero holding a random cadet up against the wall like that. When she thought about how Fritz must've spent the whole night worrying, she felt truly sorry for her part in his inner turmoil.

"Ahh, I never thought that would be the reason! I'm such an idiot for jumping to conclusions..."

Fritz was beating himself up, so Rishe tried to encourage him. "You'll have plenty of chances to impress Prince Arnold once you become a real knight. You'll be fine, Fritz... Whoa, what's wrong?"

Fritz had sunk down in front of Rishe, hanging his head. "I was going around in circles last night. I'm completely wiped out." Was there another reason for Fritz's strange mood? Rishe cocked her head as he quietly told her, "The whole reason I wanted to become a knight was because of Prince Arnold."

"I remember. Your town was attacked in the war and Prince Arnold saved you, right?"

Fritz nodded, looking glum. "I talked like it was all good memories, right? Well, it wasn't. I wasn't being honest. Other things happened back then too..."

I thought that might be the case. Fritz said he'd seen Arnold's sword, but as an evacuated child, he should have had no opportunity for that. *Prince Arnold is always at the front.* If Fritz saw that sword, he'd been left behind in the most dangerous part of Ceutena during the battle.

"When Prince Arnold saved me... Everything that happened that day feels unreal, like it was all a dream. But it wasn't." As Rishe watched Fritz, he hung his head and continued, "It's pathetic, isn't it? With the man I admired right in front of me, I remembered how scared I was then. Last night, I dreamt about that battle. That hasn't happened in such a long time. I was a knight, and I was in Ceutena. But I wasn't like Prince Arnold at all. I was so scared; I couldn't move. You were there too, Lu...and I couldn't save you."

Rishe slowly knelt until they were on the same level. "It's okay to be scared, Fritz." She rested her elbow on her knee and put her chin in her hand, smiling softly. "War *should* be scary. It's only natural to fear violence."

"But I signed up to be a knight. A knight is worthless if he's too scared to fight. No matter how much sword training I do, I'll be nothing

but a nuisance on the battlefield.”

She shook her head. “You’re not weak, Fritz. You’re a victim of the battle in Ceutena, and you went through horrible trauma. Yet you held that admiration in your heart and turned it into hope for the future, and you’re working hard to make your dreams come true.” She caught and held Fritz’s eyes—he looked genuinely astonished. “I think experiencing the terror of the battlefield will only make you a better knight, not worse.”

After all, Rishe hadn’t been scared. When the day came to protect her lords, she was prepared to go to her death. She’d risked her life on the battlefield, thinking that was what a knight should aspire to. And that was why she’d died. She didn’t regret her choice. But there was one thing she could say with certainty: “You’ll be strong because you know what it is you should be afraid of.”

Fritz’s almond-shaped eyes opened wide with surprise. He considered Rishe’s words and then laughed. “I feel a lot better now. I’m sorry, Lu.” He still sounded apologetic but less weary. Fritz gave Rishe an impish smile. “If *you* think I’m strong enough, I don’t have anything to be afraid of.”

Rishe laughed and stood up.

Fritz followed, looking refreshed. “Let’s become knights together, Lu.”

Rishe just smiled. “Looks like Sven’s back. We should go clean up, Fritz.”

“Huh? S-sure...”

Rishe schooled her expression as they walked back together. *I’m sorry for lying to you.* She had no right to agree with him. In this life, Rishe wasn’t a knight who would fight on the front lines but one of the people who would be sending them off to war. *But that’s exactly why I’m going to do everything in my power to prevent it.*

Finished with the day’s training, Rishe once again hurried back to the detached wing, bathed, and got ready for the rest of the day. When she was prepared, she and her two guard escorts headed for a VIP room

in the main palace. She knocked on the door, promptly receiving a reply from within. She thanked Kamil, one of the knights, as he opened the door, then turned to the other.

“I’m sorry, can you stand guard in the hall, Volker? Kamil will accompany me inside. Walking in with too many guards when I’m meeting with a guest might be rude.”

“Understood, Lady Rishe.” Her knight bowed and took up position in the hallway beside the door.

Rishe gave Kamil an appreciative smile, and the two of them entered together.

“Pardon me, Your Highness.”

Kyle stood, bowing to Rishe at a perfect angle, the little gesture exemplifying his diligent nature. Yesterday, Kyle had spent all day debating capital scholars, and he’d dined with them as well. Rishe hadn’t had a chance to see him since the party. She’d been worried about his condition, but as soon as she saw him, her fretting eased.

“The medicine I gave you appears to be working. I’m relieved.”

“Can you really tell how I’m feeling with a single glance?”

“I’d need to examine you for a more accurate prognosis, but I can tell when there’s been an obvious change in your condition. I’m guessing you’re coughing less in the morning and at night, and you’re able to sleep better because of it?”

“You truly have a divine eye, my lady.”

Rishe wasn’t sure how to feel about his reverent thanks. It was strange to hear from someone who used to scold her with “Clean up the books in your room!” and “You should go to bed earlier no matter how busy you are with your research.”

She smiled to cover up her feelings and sat down on the couch. Kyle sat down as well. Rishe placed the small bottle she’d brought with her on the table between them. “I would ask you to start taking these pills too. Starting today, Your Highness.”

“Very well. Are these different than the liquid medicine you gave me before?”

“Liquid medicine is more easily absorbed into the bloodstream and takes less time to work, but the effect isn’t as potent and doesn’t

last as long. I needed to make sure you'd regained your strength with a good night's sleep before administering these pills."

Her master had taught her that strong medicine was poison to a weak body. And though Kyle's illness was characterized by respiratory symptoms, the state of his stomach greatly affected his condition. More restful sleep meant an improved appetite.

"These pills are made from several crushed medicinal herbs and hardened with honey." The small bottle was filled with tablets the color of sugared milk tea. "Your breathing is sometimes shallow, right? I believe it's due to your lungs' exhaustion and your heart palpitations. You also have a habit of closing your lips tightly, lightening their color. I'd say this is because you grind your teeth."

"I...was not aware. Are you sure?"

"Normally, your top and bottom teeth are not supposed to touch; the top should sit a few millimeters above the bottom. When you relax your jaw, are your top and bottom teeth touching?"

Kyle's eyes opened wide at her question.

"I saw you touching your forehead several times during the party the other night. You have headaches, don't you? Those are caused by a body under stress, which is why headache medicine does little to help."

"You seem to be aware of my every move."

"My master from Renhua would be able to read even more."

"An apothecary named Hakurei who once examined me had similarly extraordinary eyes. I've heard people call her the most skilled apothecary in the world. To think there would be another person so knowledgeable..."

No, they're one and the same, actually, Riske thought to herself, nudging the bottle of pills toward Kyle. "Please take one thirty minutes before your meals. They'll take effect slowly and last a long time, relieving your symptoms throughout the day. However, the taste is just as bad as the liquid medicine..."

It really was disgusting. The awful taste of the medicinal herbs was only exacerbated by the discordant sweetness of the honey used as a binding agent.

Still, Kyle nodded solemnly. "If it will help me function even the slightest bit better, it's worth it."

“Your Highness.” Today was the day. Rishe put her hands in her lap and began quietly, “I happened to overhear you and Prince Arnold at the party the other day.”

Kyle’s eyes went wide before slowly settling back to normal. “You witnessed something awfully embarrassing, then. I know that the courteous thing to do would be to pack up and leave now that Prince Arnold has denied my request, but I just cannot bring myself to give up yet.”

“Were you not aware of the danger? We might not be at war right now, but as the victors of a recent conflict, Galkhein could change that at a moment’s notice. You must know the story of the battle where Prince Arnold beheaded the entire royal family of an enemy nation, Your Highness.”

Kyle shot a glance at Kamil, who stood at a slight remove. Rishe knew what he was worried about. “Don’t worry. Nothing we say here will make it back to Prince Arnold.”

Rishe’s guards were all Arnold’s personal knights, and one of their duties was indeed reporting her movements, but Kamil was the exception. Kamil was originally from the slums. Rishe had put forward a policy for the sake of his neighbors, receiving Kamil’s full endorsement. When Theodore kidnapped her, Kamil had helped her enact her plan. Rishe had thus asked him to stay quiet about her secret talks with Coyolles.

Rishe cast him a glance, and Kamil bowed before turning away from them.

“I’ve seen the policies Prince Arnold has enacted on paper. From what I read, it was clear to me that his policies always put his people first, and I never doubted once that he was a wise ruler... I wonder if his compassion could extend to enemy nations in wartime.”

Kyle had noticed, just as Rishe suspected he might. She was sure of it, but she didn’t interrupt, waiting for him to continue.

“While I am a royal who should be protecting his people, I know nothing of the battlefield. This is all supposition on my part, but I assume movement across the field is more difficult with wounded soldiers than dead ones.”

It was exactly as Kyle said. If your comrades died, all you could do was leave their bodies behind and march on. It was tragic, and it would

shred your heart, but it didn't tank your productivity. With injuries, however, it was a different story. A knight would fight to protect an injured comrade. That meant less strength devoted to winning the battle, leading to the destruction of entire squads.

"Prince Arnold likely massacred his enemies on the battlefield as a matter of strategy. If the enemy soldiers saw their fellows lying dead, they wouldn't be standing against him to protect their comrades, sapping their will to fight. He doesn't capture enemy royals; he kills them. This could also be viewed as decisive way to end a conflict, reducing casualties on each side."

Kyle had no experience with war, but Rishe agreed with his theories. *Prince Kyle really is amazing. His close relationships with merchants and scholars are one thing, but to have a good head for strategy too... He has ample ability to analyze and imagine things he has no personal experience with.* If he weren't so feeble and times weren't so bad, she was sure he'd be known as a wise ruler.

"I feel the same way you do, Your Highness."

Arnold must have slaughtered his enemies so ruthlessly in the war for a reason. In this way, he could sacrifice the few to save the many.

That's why Prince Arnold legitimately believes that an invasion he leads will be better for Coyolles than one by his father.

Arnold was kind, and that kindness allowed him to make the merciless choices of war and murder without hesitation. That was why Rishe knew she needed to stop him.

Kyle bowed to Rishe once more. "I apologize for discussing such unpleasant topics with a lady like yourself. Even if Prince Arnold truly is a tyrant, it doesn't change what I must do."

"I bet you intend to say, 'I'll protect Coyolles even if it costs me my life.'"

Kyle looked at her in surprise. Rishe's smile was sad.

"I once believed I needed to risk my life out of a desire to protect something too—but I don't think that's right anymore. After all, the life you save keeps going long after yours ends." She could sense Kyle's breath catching. "People aren't in peril just once in their lives. After you overcome the initial distress, happiness *and* danger await you."

As Rishe spoke, she remembered the royals she'd served as a

knight. She had risked her life to protect her prince and his family. Unafraid to die, she stood on the battlefield, wielding her sword with that feeling swelling in her heart. Now Rishe knew how foolish she'd been. Emperor Arnold could have caught up to their fleeing carriage. They may have reached their allied nation only to be betrayed there instead, killed all the same. And if one of their knights had survived, they might have been able to protect them from such dangers.

"Since coming here, I've learned that Galkhein's knights are strong not because they die nobly to protect their charge but because they protect their charge by staying alive no matter what happens. They're taught to fight and live on even if they lose their limbs or can no longer hold a sword." And the one who'd instilled those lessons in them was none other than the crown prince.

"Please, Prince Kyle..." Rishe looked Kyle in the eye and addressed him by name, as she had so many times in her past. The people of Coyolles always used this direct address rather than the more formal "Your Highness." It was an expression of their affection for him. In this life, it might be rude for Rishe to do the same, but she did it anyway. "For the time being, I implore you—form a small alliance with me."

"An alliance?"

"In order to persuade Prince Arnold. You are a necessary factor in the alliance between Coyolles and Galkhein." Rishe spread out the papers she'd snuck in with her on the table, having hastily written them up the night before after parting with Arnold on his balcony.

Running his eyes over her plan, Kyle swallowed hard. "Lady Rishe, who exactly *are* you?"

"I can't tell you that, unfortunately, but I'm confident that you can pull this plan off."

"Will this really persuade Prince Arnold? I'm not sure he'll even bother to listen."

"He will," Rishe said matter-of-factly. "I don't know if Prince Arnold will agree, but I know that if you follow this plan, he'll at least hear you out."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, naturally..." Rishe said, puffing out her chest with a grin,

“because I’m Prince Arnold’s future wife.”

Kyle immediately set about following Rishe’s plan that afternoon. To prevent Arnold from growing suspicious, he went along with the tours Galkhein had prepared for his visit, carrying out his part in the operation as smoothly as he could. Rishe only met with him once a day when she provided him with the new medicine she had made. On a night several days after, they began to enact their plan...

“Please check these for me, Lady Rishe.”

Rishe gasped when she saw what he had put on the table between them. “I’m shocked. Frankly, I wasn’t sure we would get it together in time even with you helping me.”

Kyle nodded sincerely. “There was a familiar face on the ship to Galkhein. I managed everything else on your list as well.”

“Thank you very much. The company I use has trouble procuring these sorts of things.”

Rishe’s current strategy required several individuals and items—the latter being outside the Aria Trading Company’s wheelhouse.

Thank goodness Prince Kyle was here. Any other country, and it would’ve been a breeze for me to find the right people myself. This was the one place Rishe hadn’t visited in her past lives. She had at least a passable understanding of the trade situations in other countries, but she was tragically unfamiliar with Galkhein’s market. Luckily, Kyle’s connections extended all the way here.

Since he’s met so many merchants face-to-face for honest dealings, he has connections with Galkhein merchants too. They must consider Prince Kyle an important customer, since they were willing to procure rush orders for him. Merchants valued personal connections highly, and someone like Kyle was an incredible score.

“They told me they had no way to verify the authenticity of this powder, though. Michel might have been able to tell, but...”

“It’s not a problem, Prince Kyle; I can verify its components. And I already told you I’d like to keep this plan a secret from Michel. Is the

professor in town again today?”

“Yes. Whenever he’s not experimenting, he likes to immerse himself in books.”

Kyle was assuming that Michel was visiting the library in town, but Rishe was more familiar with his patterns of behavior. If Michel was down in the town, she had a good idea of what he was up to.

“I managed to get Prince Arnold to agree to meet with you one more time. Two days from now, in the evening.”

“Yes. Our party plans to return to Coyolles in four days.”

Kyle’s visit was ostensibly to celebrate Arnold and Rishe’s wedding. His other pretexts were an exchange of information between their respective scholars and some observational tours of the country; the formation of an alliance was not on the books for either prince. If he extended his stay for no reason, Arnold’s father—the emperor—would grow suspicious.

If they find out what we’re doing, one of two things will happen: The emperor will invade Coyolles, or, to prevent that, Prince Arnold will invade Coyolles. Either way, Prince Kyle will be in danger.

Concealing her worries, Rishe spoke up, her voice bright. “It will be fine, Prince Kyle. I was expecting your meeting with Prince Arnold would be tomorrow—now I have another day to prepare.”

“How fortunate. Please tell me if there is anything I can do to help.”

“You’ve done more than enough. Given that I’m marrying into this country, I’ll be very pleased to have you as an ally,” Rishe said.

Kyle’s eyes widened, and he bowed deeply to her.

Rishe returned to her room and dismissed her servants in order to “sleep”—or rather, to quickly prepare the next phase of her plan. After a bit of work, she listened carefully to the adjacent room. Arnold didn’t seem to be there; he must have still been handling his duties. Once she was certain, she went onto her balcony with a rope. Rishe descended from her fourth-floor room to the garden, heading for her field. She

approached as silently as she could, catching the expected scent of flowers.

“Hello, Professor.” Just as she thought.

When she addressed him, the blond man looked up from where he stood beside the field, an herbal cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Michel tucked his hair behind his ear and smiled, plucking the cigarette from between his lips.

“Hey, Rishe. Good evening. You ready to take a journey with me?”

Rishe shook her head. “I believe I told you I wouldn’t be taking you up on that offer. I’m only here to speak with you.”

“All right. Let’s talk.”

Facing Michel, Rishe couldn’t help but recall that day in her life as an alchemist where their paths had diverged. A little nervous, she asked, “Professor, do you really intend to give Prince Arnold your gunpowder?”

“I think I will. After all, I expect he’ll make effective, decisive use of it. He’ll change the world.” Michel took a drag on his cigarette, blowing out smoke before going on. “Poison is brought into this world to do harm. If you don’t use that poison to kill, it has no reason to exist, does it?” She’d heard those words in her previous life too. “Gunpowder is the same. It exists to change the world, therefore it must be used to tip order on its head.” Michel was still smiling, the light in his eyes turning them to ice. “All things must fulfill their purpose. I am no exception.”

Rishe knew why he was being so obstinate. “Someone who was born to turn the world upside down must act in accordance with their mission, then?”

“That’s right. You know exactly what I’m trying to say, Rishe.”

Of course she knew; he’d told her before. He had even said it with the same unyielding expression.

“If I cannot achieve this, there is no meaning in my existence. And if gunpowder does not find someone to make use of it, it will suffer the same fate.”

“It must be used even if it will lead to many deaths?”

“Heh heh heh, what a dilemma. I’m sorry, Rishe. I truly don’t mean to upset you.” Michel’s smile faltered, growing lonely. “That much, at least, is true.”

Rishe clenched her fists. “You were always like this, Professor.”

“Hm?”

“You behave more carelessly than anyone I know, but you deprive yourself of true freedom. There are things you want and things you don’t want, but you’re a captive to this ‘role’ you think you must play. You pour your alchemical talent into your experiments, striving to shoulder some burden you’ve arbitrarily decided belongs to you.”

“What are you—”

“There are certainly things in this world that only you can accomplish. But achieving incredible feats is not your purpose.” Rishe stopped to take a breath, staring him down. “People don’t need a purpose to exist in this world.”

Michel’s eyes widened just a little, so quickly and slightly it was hardly an expression. But for just a fraction of a second, he looked *surprised*. In all the years she’d spent with him, Rishe had never seen that look on his face before.

“You say such strange things.” The surprise was gone, replaced by his usual soft smile. “Nothing comes into this world without meaning. Once it exists, it must strive to fulfill that meaning.”

“Professor, I—”

Michel turned away, but he looked back just once to tell her, “Good night, Rishe. See you tomorrow.”

Rishe was a little relieved that his goodbye hinted at the future. In her third life, they’d parted with the devastating words, “Farewell, my student.”

Shutting her eyes, she inhaled deeply. Exhaled. Then her eyes flew open. *I have to hurry...*

She only had one day left.

Their appointment with Arnold took place in a palace meeting room. As one of many chambers used by the royal family, its furnishings were first class. The round table in the center of the room would never be found in guest quarters.

Eventually, there was a knock. Oliver, Arnold's attendant, opened the door and waved the prince in. Kyle, who was already seated, stood and bowed.

"Prince Arnold. I appreciate you taking the time to see me."

"Let me just say this first." Arnold glared at Kyle from across the table. "I don't intend to have a repeat of our conversation from the other night. I still see no value in an alliance with Coyolles."

"I am aware."

"However..." His eyes flicked to the corner of the room. "This'll be worth my while, right, Rishe?"

"Of course, Prince Arnold." Standing away from the table like a simple maid, Rishe returned Arnold's gaze with a smile. *Don't be intimidated. This is a business negotiation. A fight.*

Arnold's stare was aggressive, and his belligerence raised the tension in the room. Kyle must have felt it too.

Smirking, Arnold took a seat. "Go on, sit," he told Kyle. "Let's get started already."

"First things first, Prince Arnold." Rishe went over to the table, standing between Kyle and Arnold. She faced the crown prince and spread her arms wide, smiling at him. "Can you tell what's different about me today?"

Arnold frowned at the question. He put his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. "Your necklace, bracelets, and earrings. I don't recognize any of them. You haven't worn them in front of me before, have you?"

She'd expected his scowl but not his guess. *He's got sharp eyes. His mind is quick too. It feels like he sees right through me sometimes.*

Rishe nodded and sat down. "It's just as you say. I purchased these from the Aria Trading Company yesterday. All these pieces were crafted in Coyolles."

"Allow me to explain Coyolles's industry," Kyle cut in. "We mine

jewels, but we are also trapped inside for over half the year. These conditions have produced extremely talented artisans.”

People from Coyolles had many strategies for dealing with the long winters. Their custom of men singing women’s praises had developed to maintain harmony within the household while families were stuck inside together. They’d honed their craft to pass the time.

“In Coyolles, artisans can complete their work far faster—and with more precision—than elsewhere. This is one of the treasures we can boast of above the rest of the world.”

Everything Kyle said was true. The ring Arnold had purchased for Rishe in town would have normally taken a month to complete, but the letter from the old woman told Rishe the crafting time would only be a week. That was thanks to the artisans from Coyolles who’d been on the ship with Kyle.

Craftsmen from Coyolles are the best in the world. Living as a merchant taught me that.

Galkhein was Coyolles’s polar opposite. Due to the war, Galkhein’s skilled artisans—jewelers included—were practically nonexistent. Crafting weapons out of metal took a different set of skills than making fine, delicate pieces, and people from Galkhein could pretty much only do the former. None of their artisans could do detailed metalwork.

Still, Arnold’s gaze was cold. “Rishe.”

Rishe shuddered, but she maintained her soft smile. *This will work.*

She knew Arnold wasn’t interested in jewelers, but this was the nature of business. If presented with one product, a customer had two choices: buy or don’t buy. Choosing the latter could result in a lost business opportunity. However, presenting multiple products changed the customer’s frame of mind. Instead of to buy or not to buy, they asked, “Buy which?” and “Which of these is most valuable?” A sale was easier with an array of choices, rather than just one.

I don’t expect cheap tactics like that to work on Prince Arnold, though. Rishe glanced at Kyle, and her former client quietly nodded. He reached into his jacket pocket, drew something out, and placed it on the table. Arnold’s expression didn’t change.

“This product is familiar to you, isn’t it, Prince Arnold?” Kyle asked, although he already knew the answer.

“It’s mine, so yeah. What about it?” Arnold’s response was indifferent.

Rishe jumped in to explain. “This is—”

“Wait.” Arnold stopped her, glowering. His earlier disinterest looked genuine, but now that was changing.

Sensing why, Rishe was surprised. “I didn’t think you’d even notice this.” Rishe still had her business smile on, but inside she was reeling. Arnold hadn’t said anything, but he’d likely seen through her ploy.

“The watch on the table is not, in fact, yours. This is an exact *imitation* of the watch you treasured during the war, Prince Arnold.”

Rishe plucked something from a bag at her side. Just like Kyle had, she placed it on the table before her.

“I have your watch right here.”

Two pocket watches sat on the table. They were identical, save for a slightly different metallic sheen. This small difference had tipped Arnold off.

“Prince Kyle’s watch is a replica of the one I borrowed from you.”

Arnold looked quietly at Rishe.



“This was created by an artisan who arrived in Galkhein on the same ship as Prince Kyle. I consulted one of the jewelry sellers on what we needed and borrowed the equipment. Apparently, wheels and springs and such are cast in the same exact way they cast metal for jewelry.”

Artisans made a model of wax, created a mold, and then poured the metal into that mold. The model was the most time-consuming step, but once they had the mold, it could be used again and again in a short amount of time. That was the benefit of casting. Skilled craftsmen could cast items with minute, finicky details. Still, getting it finished in time had been a gamble.

A “skilled artisan from Coyolles” and someone who arrived with Prince Kyle on a royal ship. I thought I knew who it would be, and I’m glad I was right.

Rishe was very familiar with the individual who had invented the pocket watch, and that individual had commissioned the fine components for the watch from an artisan from Coyolles. They’d picked Coyolles precisely because of their jewelry-making techniques. This meant the craftsman who’d come to Galkhein already had molds to craft watch parts. It was always smart to bring successful samples of your work when you intended to market yourself overseas.

If I had the parts, I could assemble a pocket watch easily. After all, Michel taught me so carefully in my past life.

Rishe turned to Arnold, feeling a little dejected. “The pocket watch you treasured during the war was made with the intricate art of metalworking, putting together springs and wheels. Soon, many other products will be fashioned in the same way.” Rishe was sure of that. These metal processing techniques opened so many avenues. It sounded fantastical now, but countless scholars all over the world were conducting research on this very subject. Rishe had seen plenty of their studies in her life as an alchemist.

“Prince Arnold, I think you’ll want this.” He understood the value of this invention; he’d used it in his own machinations. “You can bring this technology to Galkhein!”

Arnold stared at Rishe. She held his gaze, not letting him go as she went full steam ahead.

“You’re well aware of the wonders of the pocket watch. But what

if that incredibly rare technology could be widely and cheaply available to the masses? Imagine the other applications such technology could produce!”

The pocket watch they were showing him only took a few days to make. Rishe didn’t need to emphasize the short production time; Arnold would find that obvious.

“Scholars all over the world are looking into applications for springs and gears in modern technology. If they combine their knowledge, they could create all kinds of things! Carriages that move without horses! Ships that sail without wind! These dreams will soon become reality.” Rishe beamed, overflowing with confidence. “But when it comes to the actual production of such technology, you can look all over the world and you’ll only find one place capable of it: Coyolles.”

“Hah!” Arnold put his chin in his hand again, smirking. “You speak like you’ve seen the future yourself.”

He sounded like he’d figured it all out. Arnold couldn’t possibly know her secret—how was he that sharp? The future she spoke of was only something she’d imagined. In her previous lives, Coyolles was destroyed, their already meager national power eroded until Galkhein invaded. She needed to make sure that outcome changed—in any way she could.

I need to convince him right here and now. Rishe clenched her fists.

The smile was gone from Arnold’s face. “So?” His voice chilled the room, and then he turned to the person who’d hardly piqued his interest thus far. “Kyle Morgan Cleverly. What exactly are you after?”

Rishe stiffened at the crown prince’s icy tone. Dark light bloomed in Arnold’s eyes as he looked at Kyle. He was expressionless and his voice was level, but the intensity he exuded made Rishe’s skin tingle. She wasn’t even the one he was looking at, but she couldn’t help her nerves.

Arnold continued cruelly, “I will admit that you possess impressive technology. Something that my country lacks.” His shapely fingers slammed down on the armrest of his chair. The sound echoed throughout the room, screwing the tension tighter. Rishe was sure he knew exactly what he was doing. “Your naiveté disgusts me.”

Rishe gulped. If his anger affected her this severely, she could

hardly imagine the pressure Kyle felt.

Indifferent to their reactions, Arnold went on, “You do understand that knowledge, technology, and people can all be brought to other countries? I don’t even need to lure your country’s artisans to Galkhein with money; I can just threaten you. My military means you’ll give me anything I want. Then—when my country has perfected your techniques—I’ll simply kill all survivors of Coyolles. It’s as simple as that.” He spoke of it as though it were nothing. “Did you stop to think for yourself for a moment? Or are you just a figurehead prince doing whatever my wife tells you to?”

“Your Highness! Prince Kyle is—”

“I could say the same to you, Rishe.” He faced her, and Rishe held her tongue. “Did you not imagine what I might do once I have that technology in my hands?”

She knew exactly what he’d do. Or, well, what the *original* Arnold would do. But she knew something else now. *And that’s why...*

“Lady Rishe believes in you, Prince Arnold,” Kyle piped up. In the incredibly tense room, he sat tall and locked eyes with Arnold. “I was apprehensive when she suggested using Coyolles’s metal processing technology as a bargaining chip, but Lady Rishe was insistent in her faith.” Kyle’s blue eyes looked like two pools of crystalline water. The light in them was pure and earnest. “She believes in your desire for the power to shape the future into something better.”

It was just as Kyle said. Even if Emperor Arnold Hein would wage war in several years’ time, even if Prince Arnold evoked fear for his wartime cruelty several years ago, Rishe knew exactly what sort of person the Arnold right in front of her was.

“I came to this country because I believed in you too,” Kyle went on. “From your policy records, it was clear to me that you were an excellent ruler who paid respect even to the soldiers of his enemies. Even now, you agree to meet with me.”

“It’s just...faith? You *believe* I won’t simply invade Coyolles and steal its technology?”

“Precisely.”

“What a fool you are. I see now why you thought you could rely on me.”

“Yes, I was a fool to seek out your protection—but I don’t believe my desire to seek an alliance was misguided,” Kyle said, his voice strong and clear. “I came to Galkhein because of my deep admiration for you as a ruler.” He put a hand to his heart. “When Coyolles loses its gems, it will still retain the knowledge of its scholars and its metalworking techniques. If Galkhein were to lend us its political power, we could work together. I believe we could achieve the future Lady Rishe spoke of.”

“...”

“I will spare no effort to earn your trust. If you would just give me a chance—”

“Pardon me.” Someone entered the room, cutting Kyle off.

Rishe looked to the door, and her eyes widened. *Prince Theodore?!*

“Good day, Prince Kyle. Terribly sorry for interrupting, Brother. Let me apologize for my rudeness, barging in on your meeting like this.” Theodore bowed his head, rattling off pleasantries he normally would have skipped. He then glanced at Rishe and gave her a signal by blinking a set number of times: *Emergency!*

Springing to her feet, Rishe addressed Arnold and Kyle. “I’m so sorry. I must take my leave for the time being.”

“L-Lady Rishe, where are you—”

“Please let me know your conclusion once you’ve reached it. I really do apologize, but goodbye for now!” Rishe squeezed out the words and fled the room with Theodore, her two guards scrambling after her.

“They sure left in a hurry,” Arnold muttered. Chin still resting in his hand, he coolly added, “Let me apologize as well. That was awfully rude of my wife and brother.”

“It surprised me, to be sure, but it’s no problem at all. Back to what I was saying before—”

“Oliver. Come in.”

At his order, Arnold’s silver-haired attendant slipped into the

room. Kyle's eyes went round—the man had not come alone.

“Prince Arnold...”

Roughly a dozen knights had entered with him. They walked silently into the room and lined up behind Arnold, standing at attention.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Flanked by his knights, Arnold wordlessly stared Kyle down.

Chapter 7

AFTER LEAVING the meeting room, Rishe hurried down the hall. Really, she wanted to sprint, but she couldn't exactly do that in the imperial palace. Trying to stuff down her panic, she listened to Theodore's rundown of the situation.

"He threw off all of his tails," Theodore murmured as he walked beside her. "He was last seen in a seventeenth-district alley in the southern part of the capital. That was three hours ago. We're searching the area now."

"Under what circumstances did they lose him? Even if he noticed the tail, for him to escape people from the slums is just..."

"Apparently, they smelled something sweet right beforehand."

Theodore explained the effects, and Rishe recognized the "scent" as an anesthetic derived from a type of mushroom.

"They entered the alley, and that's the last thing they remember. When they woke up, two hours had passed and their target was missing. In other words..." Theodore lowered his voice even more. "We no longer have eyes on Michel Hévin."

Rishe's lips closed in a thin line.

Several days ago, she'd asked Theodore for a favor. *"I want you to watch Professor Michel and tell me what he does. If he tries to get near Prince Arnold, stop him."*

Theodore's people from the slums knew everything there was to know about the capital, boasting an impressive information network and methods for reaching any corner of the city. Additionally, Theodore's surveillance network within the palace kept tabs on Arnold's activities. Michel had evaded all of them.

"Just in case, please have the affected people drink plenty of water. If there's anything else you can tell me—"

"They reported that he was carrying a different bag than usual. A sturdy-looking metal case. He handled it very delicately."

Rishe gasped.

“My operatives report whenever targets make a change to their usual routine.” Theodore smirked. At times like this, he really resembled Arnold. “As soon as I received word, I mobilized all my contacts in the slums. I have scores of people searching outward from the seventeenth district right now.”

“Wow, Prince Theodore...”

“The report on losing Michel Hévin didn’t get to me for about two and a half hours. Once they find their target, they’ll do exactly what you told them to do. They’re sending me regular updates.”

Rishe’s eyes widened in surprise. She hadn’t expected him to be that on top of things. She hadn’t told Theodore about the gunpowder, and she was hiding Michel’s desire to give it to Arnold. True, she’d given him steps to take when engaging the “target,” but Theodore didn’t know any details. She had simply said, “Keep an eye on this foreign man, do this if he acts in a certain way, and report back to me.” She hadn’t expected him to be so good at improvising.

“Why do you look so surprised? Did you think Arnold’s little brother could only mindlessly follow orders?”

“O-of course not! I’m just shocked you trust me. I haven’t even told you why I want you to follow him.”

Running next to her, Theodore gave her an exasperated look. “Someone innocent wouldn’t attack the people tailing them. They’d just try to lose them or seek help from the proper authorities. A man who knocks out his pursuers with some weird drug is obviously planning to do something crazy.”

Rishe couldn’t respond. Her gaze dropped as she sped through the halls. Theodore had all sorts of ruffians from the slums—practically criminals—under his command. His words rang true.

Theodore glanced back at the knights following them and lowered his voice. “I made the call to pull you out of a meeting with my brother because I judged the situation an emergency. I’ve tipped our hand to him, so he’ll certainly probe into this; I apologize for that in advance.”

“It’s all right. Thank you, Prince Theodore. Let me just confirm: Have Michel and Prince Arnold had any contact?”

“I think it’s safe to say they haven’t. I don’t think he’s approached Oliver either. One thing does bother me, though.”

“You mean how you gained entry to the meeting room?” Rishe also found it strange.

He nodded. “Even if I am the younger prince, they wouldn’t let me barge in on a conversation between my brother and Prince Kyle. Yet Oliver didn’t even try to stop me.”

“And Prince Arnold barely reacted. He wasn’t surprised.”

Maybe his surprise simply hadn’t shown on his face. Or perhaps he’d seen through it all and had been expecting something like this.

Or maybe it was more convenient for Prince Arnold for me to leave...

She could be overthinking, but if Rishe didn’t interrogate every idea that came to her, she’d never figure out Arnold’s behavior. In any case, she had ample reason to be wary. “Tell me, what’s the state of the search—”

“Excuse me, Prince Theodore.” A knight appeared from down the hall and whispered something to Theodore in a practiced manner. The large man was one of Theodore’s imperial knights, as Rishe recalled.

“Got it. Come on, Sister. This way!”

“You’ve already found him?!”

“Whose brother do you think I am? Besides, he returned to a place where it’s easy to get eyes on him!”

Theodore left the palace with Rishe chasing after him, running out into the courtyard with her skirt hitched up. It was easy enough to guess what he meant.

“Ugh...” She was out of breath, having run for so long. When she finally arrived at their destination, shoulders heaving, the man they sought was there looking utterly relaxed.

“Hey, Rishe.” Michel wore a composed smile, standing in the flower-filled garden. Four knights loomed behind him, their uniforms bearing a slightly different design than that of Arnold’s imperial knights. Surrounded, Michel sat down on a white bench in the garden, smoke from his herbal cigarette rising from his lips.

“You’re a brilliant student, but you need some lessons on how to treat your lab rats. Cornered animals can be unpredictable, you know? If a cat has no tree to climb, it’ll attack the dog chasing it. Rowr!” Michel swiped his right hand like a cat’s paw. “Not that I need to alter

my behavior much, even if I'm being surveilled." He tilted his head to the side, shoulder-length hair swaying with the movement.

Theodore was just as out of breath as Rishe, but he casually stepped in front of her as if to protect her. "What's this guy's problem? Aren't you acting a little too familiar with my brother's fiancée?"

By this point, Rishe's knights had caught up as well; Rishe sent them a look telling them to hold. After that, she studied the knights surrounding Michel.

"Prince Theodore. The knights behind the professor..."

"I know. You all can leave."

A knight bowed awkwardly. "I apologize, Your Highness. We are not able to follow that order."

"What?" Theodore frowned his displeasure. The knights flinched but seemed to have no intention of leaving.

Watching this exchange, Michel blinked slowly. "Hey, Rishe, why do you want to get rid of the knights? I don't suppose it's out of consideration for me, is it? That's very kind. Thank you." With an impish smile, he added, "But there's no need for that."

This presence... Rishe whirled around at the sound of boots on grass. She didn't need to see him to know who was coming; she had memorized his tells just the other day to avoid running into him. *It's Count Lawvine!*

"Lucius Alcott..." The tall military man stood before Rishe, eyes wide with shock. He quickly schooled his expression, bowing first to Theodore. "Your Highness Prince Theodore. Have my knights offended you somehow?"

"Well, I told them to leave, but they wouldn't listen. Would you mind explaining that, Lawvine?"

"Please forgive them. Their loyalty does not permit them to follow your orders, even if you are a prince."

"And I'd like to know why that is."

Lawvine had the air of a man on a battlefield. Gone was the caring instructor Rishe had known these last few days. "We serve His Majesty, not you."

Theodore looked almost frightened at the mention of his father.

“Michel Hévin has announced a significant incident fifteen minutes from now. Of his own creation.”

“Professor Michel, you didn’t...”

“It’s just as he says. I mentioned it to a random knight I found in the palace. That a crime would occur at the eighteenth hour and it would be my doing. Arrest me.”

What was Michel saying? Rishe was confused for a moment before she remembered his goal. “And by this strategy Prince Arnold will hear of your gunpowder?”

“Well, I’ll have to confess everything in the investigation afterward. I imagine either the crown prince or the emperor will be very interested in what I have to say.” Michel smiled softly, innocently. “Considering the scale of what’s about to happen, it would be impossible for the royal family to ignore.”

Michel really *was* planning on using his gunpowder for some plot. Rishe had seen this coming. In fact, she’d resigned herself to it and factored it into her plans. But her heart still sank to discover she was right.

Theodore clicked his tongue. “This isn’t good.” He turned around to Rishe and whispered, “Lawvine isn’t a knight. He can do this because he rules over Galkhein’s northernmost territory.”

“You mean he’s judged Michel, a guest from Coyolles, to be an enemy of Galkhein.”

“That’s right. If my father’s already heard about this, my brother may know as well. Father might have ordered him to do something.”

Rishe clenched her fists. Michel had implied an attack on Galkhein, and Lawvine was monitoring him. If the emperor had gotten word of that and told Arnold...

Prince Kyle!

Doing her best to stay calm, Rishe met Michel’s eyes. “Professor. Your actions have pulled in unrelated people.”

“Yes. I know that.”

“Professor!” Rishe couldn’t help raising her voice.

Michel returned her gaze and plucked the cigarette from his lips. “Well, this unveiling deserves a show, don’t you think? That way,

people will understand gunpowder's might and just how much unhappiness it can cause."

"Unhappiness...?"

"Indeed. That's why gunpowder exists. I have to help it fulfill its purpose."

Michel had repeated these words so often in Rishe's third life. He believed all things were created for a reason, a role they were meant to fulfill. Fulfilling that role was the only way to give their life meaning.

That's why the professor and I parted. Rishe was never able to accept Michel's way of thinking. She'd wanted to stop him from using his gunpowder, had pleaded with him not to. In the end, she could never get him to listen. They'd gone on to live separate lives, never again crossing paths.

"I brought it into this world—I am responsible for its existence. Even if it ends up making people unhappy, it must fulfill its purpose." He wore the same smile on his face now that he had that moonlit night. Rishe remembered the last time they'd exchanged words.

Just then, a knight flew to Theodore's side and whispered in his ear.

"Sister!" Theodore shouted.

Rishe listened to his report and let out a tiny sigh of relief. *We made it.*

Michel Hévin was feeling rather strange, standing in Galkhein's imperial palace's garden. The girl in front of him was to blame. He just couldn't understand the strong, earnest way she was looking at him, the person he'd only begun calling his student on a whim when he arrived here.

It's odd. Michel tilted his head, savoring the sweet taste of his cigarette. *She looks angry, but that's not all. Although, who am I to guess at what's in someone's heart?*

Vague memories of a distant day came to mind.

"My wife is dead because of you." His father had said those words

countless times.

Their mansion had been dim and full of books. His father was thin, like he was slowly eroding. Eventually, their servants all disappeared, and Michel was stranded with his father's words day after day.

"You must repay me. You were born to make us miserable. You're a reaper."

His father was a brilliant scholar once, or so Michel had heard. But he changed when his wife died. And he'd kept the cause of her death—Michel's birth—beside him despite his deep hatred.

"I'm sorry for being born, Father." He apologized to his father, clutching his robe around himself.

Even when he was hungry or lonely, he never asked his father for anything. Instead, he read through the books in the mansion to distract himself from his empty stomach. When he was studying, sometimes his father's eyes would soften.

Fortunately, studying suited him well. He was quick to absorb information and a natural at putting it into practice. The things he learned from books came to him as easily as breathing or drinking.

Thanks to all his studying, his father eventually brought him into the outside world. Michel was swiftly surrounded by adults. A bit removed from the cluster, his father said, *"This child has inherited my abilities. Make use of him in my stead."*

A commotion went through the adults, but Michel was ecstatic. For the first time in his life, he was something other than the child who killed his mother and ruined his father's happiness.

"Father, will doing this help you?" he asked, desperate.

His father threw him a hateful look. *"Of course."* Michel remembered shuddering at how cold the words felt. *"It's the least you can do to repay me for raising a reaper like you. This is the only thing you're good for."*

He'd forgotten long ago how his father's words had made him feel. Maybe he'd found it hard to stand, or his heart throbbed painfully in his chest. Maybe he couldn't breathe, the world spinning as he knelt and murmured *"I'm sorry"* under his breath.

But the more his father pushed him away, the more Michel

immersed himself in his studies. The world had opened up to him as soon as he entered a laboratory. Anything he wanted to know, he could find out with experimentation and research. Alchemy was so much more clear-cut to him than his father's heart, easier than gauging the man's mood on a given day. Plus, the adults in the laboratory were nicer to him than his father was.

"Michel's pretty amazing. Guess he really is that guy's son."

Secretly thinking of them as older brothers—or maybe even as fathers—Michel learned as much as he could about alchemy under their tutelage.

When the change happened, it was such a small thing. Michel was reading over a paper the adults had written, adding his own insights. What was lacking in the written plan instantly became apparent to him, as well as what was overabundant and what was uncertain.

"If they do it this way, it will work better." He was giddy as his pen raced across the paper. The adults were attempting to create a chemical with a specific desired effect, pooling their knowledge to solve the problem.

"Then you just mix these two chemicals together. We won't know for sure until we experiment, but what do you think?" Michel had asked them, looking up hopefully. For the first time in his life, he felt like he was of value to someone. This was the only proper way to make use of Michel, who had been born to make his parents miserable. At least, that was the foolish dream he'd had.

"Michel," one of them said, voice ice-cold. *"You really are a little reaper, aren't you?"*

Their eyes pierced him. Michel couldn't move. The adults looked down at him and whispered to one another.

"What's going on? How is he so good at making chemicals to kill people?"

"Well, no one's taught him. It must be innate talent, just as his father said."

"If we mass-produce these chemicals, our country can win the war with barely a life lost. But is making use of a demonic invention like this ethical?"

His father had been right. Michel really was brought into the

world to make people unhappy.

In the end, that chemical was never used. The royal palace where the research took place was raided, and everything was burned, the records of their experiments turned to ash. His father and the other alchemists lost their lives. Michel alone escaped the fires of war, traveling on his own after that.

Thanks to his father's name, Michel received a warm enough reception in any country that valued scholarly pursuits. His father's published research was full of things Michel himself had come up with in that dark mansion, but he didn't care about that. His studies were all he had, and once he came to grips with that, he found alchemy surprisingly enjoyable. Research done to satisfy his own curiosity and not for someone else's sake left him feeling peaceful and placid. He wondered if this was what it was like to spend time with friends or family.

Therefore, when he finally invented gunpowder, Michel was satisfied. He'd created it because he was good at bringing misfortune. Just like Michel himself, his gunpowder had the power to bring about despair. And anything brought into this world had to fulfill its purpose.

"Something poisonous is only valuable when it kills someone, thereby fulfilling its duty."

Come to think of it, the other day, Rishe had said, "People don't need a purpose to exist in this world." But that wasn't true. Everything needed a meaning to live. Otherwise, it would be weeded out.

A little ways away from him, Rishe began speaking, looking straight at Michel. "When I heard those words from someone in the past, I simply asked him, 'Can a poison really never better someone's life?' That was a mistake. I should have come right out and told him." His momentary student completely denied Michel's way of thinking. "Even poison can better someone's life." She really was a strange girl.

"You shouldn't take the words of people like me so seriously."

"I suppose that's true. You can't mindlessly accept everything a professor teaches you."

Michel listened to Rishe with a smile on his face. It was almost the eighteenth hour. There was room for a slight margin of error, but at roughly that time, the three gunpowder barrels he'd set in Galkhein's capital city would explode.

With its mild climate, a spring day in Galkhein was the perfect condition for his creation to function. He'd done tests in deserted spaces outdoors, but this was his first experiment in an urban center. Michel had been planning a remote experiment like this for some time now. The climate, the level of humidity, the weather, the density of the buildings—he'd strolled around Galkhein's capital city, finding places that fit his specifications. And on a supremely dry day, after a string of clear skies, he'd shaken his tails and set up all three locations for his experiment. He used clock parts to rig a timer for the explosives. He expected the damage to be extensive; there would likely be some casualties. If the effects were anything like he was hoping, Galkhein's warmongering royal family would surely take notice of his invention.

The time was rapidly approaching.

"I'm sorry, Rishe, but that's just how it has to be. I made you my student to play at being human, but I've always been a monster."

"No one can decide a person's worth. Not you or anyone else! To you, I might just be your student in passing, but I want to play a different role!" After that, Michel thought he heard her whisper, "This time will be different."

She turned to the tall, gray-haired man behind her. "Lord Lawvine, please forgive me for lying about my identity. But first, I would like to clarify something about this situation. Michel Hévin has not yet stated what he plans to do. Am I correct?"

"It is as you say, my lady."

True enough, Michel had yet to explain what gunpowder was or the nature of the attack he had planned. Experiments could go wrong without a steady handle on unpredictable variables, and remote experiments *always* had unpredictable variables. The detonation of the hidden gunpowder could fail. Because of that, he hadn't shown his hand. Had Rishe picked up on his plan? If she had, she was predicting him easily, as if she'd been his student for years. It struck him as awfully strange.

There's no way I'd ever keep someone beside me for long. Kyle's face floated to mind, but he waved it away. In any case, it was nearly time.

"Michel Hévin appears to be laboring under a misunderstanding, so I'd like to go ahead and correct it."

Rishe's unexpected words made Michel's eyes go wide once more.

Ah, I see. Even if Rishe somehow knows what gunpowder is, she doesn't know that I can detonate it with a timed device.

He wasn't even completely sure she knew that much. She probably figured that if they just arrested Michel now, they could forestall the tragedy at the eighteenth hour. While Michel was thinking such thoughts, Rishe turned to him.

"My alchemy teacher once told me that experiments always have unpredictable variables, and if you don't have a handle on those unpredictable variables, it's easy to mess them up."

Michel gasped. That was *exactly* what he'd been thinking.

Rishe's clear green eyes never wavered. "You may be a genius alchemist, but as long as you're missing information on the pawns in your experiments, you'll never get the results you want."

Suddenly, she held a golden pocket watch in her right hand. "Your experiment has failed," she announced. "There was no way for you to account for the unpredictable variable: me. Thankfully, everyone involved finished their work very quickly."

"What are you saying?"

A bell rang in the distance, functioning as both an announcement from the church and the *clang* of the would-be clock tower. It was now the eighteenth hour. The sun was setting over the capital city, dyeing the sky a deep blue.

Michel looked westward at the view of the city visible from the garden. He located what he thought was one of the districts with his barrels. Just then...

"Lightning?!"

There was a streak of vertical light. It couldn't have been lightning; the skies were clear. This light, however, rose from the ground up and raced into the sky.

"No... That's—"

"Your creations are not just poisons. You can only imagine them bringing people harm, but if you change the way you use them, they are worth so much more."

In the next instant, beads of light burst into the skies above the capital with a great *boom*! It was his gunpowder. Michel knew that from

a glance, but this was not what he had been expecting. In fact, he never could have predicted what he was seeing.

The light looked like an enormous flower.

The chemical he'd created—the one meant to blow human bodies to bits—had made a flower bloom in the night sky.

That's one up safely. Rishe let out a relieved breath as she looked out at the city from the palace garden. Apart from one of Rishe's guards, who'd run off somewhere, everyone was gazing skyward. Even Theodore, her accomplice, was looking up with round eyes—the eyes that resembled his brother's.

After losing track of Michel, Theodore's network had searched all through the capital. As it turned out, they were searching for the gunpowder, not Michel himself.

"The main target of this reconnaissance is not Michel," she'd explained when she asked Theodore for help. She'd relayed things to him a few days ago, laying out several pieces of paper across a table in a meeting room.

"Michel probably intends to place items in three specific areas across the city. I want your people to evacuate everyone in the surrounding district if they find something with this specific shape. Do you have anyone skilled at disarming traps?"

"Of course. Half the people who work for me."

"Have those people follow what I've outlined here." She handed Theodore a diagram of the device she thought Michel would be using. *"Just like traps, these devices are dangerous if you don't follow these exact steps. But unlike traps, they're not made to be difficult to disarm—just do everything as I've written and the degree of danger involved will plummet."*

"These diagrams will make this much simpler than what those guys are used to. I'll tell them to be extremely cautious just in case."

"Thank you. Next, I have a list of candidate sites where you'll likely find your targets. Even if you lose Michel, this list will narrow your search considerably."

Rishe's explanation to Theodore had gone on for some time. If they tailed Michel every day, they'd get a sense of the locations he was scoping out. Thanks to their information network, they even had a picture of where he'd been going before they began tailing him. Michel tended to stand out—he was androgynous and beautiful, and he wasn't the type to resort to a disguise. Additionally, Rishe had the advantage of knowing Michel's plans for his experiments from her life as an alchemist.

In his plan to test the chemical in an urban area, he prepared three devices. He wanted to use districts with small buildings and a lot of air flow. People from the slums, who traveled all across the city to earn money, would be familiar with places like that. Limiting the candidates to places on Michel's daily routes made it easier to find what they were looking for. Michel would make sure his chosen locations were optimized for eliminating as many unpredictable variables as possible for his remote experimentation.

The perfect climate, humidity, weather, and location. He even told me he'd set the three devices over a kilometer apart from each other to account for different wind conditions. I keep going over it again and again, and I remember it all.

He would set the explosions for just before sunset, when there would be enough light to observe the results but fewer people out on the streets. In Galkhein this time of year, that would be the eighteenth hour in the evening. Just after she'd finished her earlier conversation with Michel, Theodore received word they'd made it in time.

Rishe closed the pocket watch in her hand and heaved a little sigh.

Michel stood and took a shaky step forward. "What was that...?"

The knights pointed their swords at him, then lowered them just as quickly. The event he'd described, at the time he'd described it, only left them confused.

Lawvine just looked down at Michel without a word, his face unreadable.

"Colored flames. The smell of gunpowder. You detonated them in the sky? What did you add to...?" Michel trailed off, racking his brains.

The devices Michel made were very precise and easy to understand, just as I thought they would be. Rishe's time concern had been over the

right moment to fire the bundles of gunpowder—her fireworks—up into the sky. *Once they found the devices, we were kind of gambling on whether Theodore’s agents could rewire them. It’s a testament to their design that people who had never seen them before could use them with just a brief set of instructions.*

Nothing extraneous existed on the devices; you could tell a lot just by looking at them. They were simplified—made convenient for anyone who wanted to use them.

Rishe called the beautiful flames shooting into the sky “fireworks.” Their splendor seemed to have been burned vividly into Michel’s eyes. He was looking up like a boy marveling at the stars, in awe of the unknown.

The second round of fireworks soared upward. While Michel was distracted, Rishe told him, “My teacher once showed me an aurora.”

Michel slowly turned toward her, his face wiped of all expression.

“At the time, I was trying to solve a problem. I wanted to know if it was possible to detect harmful substances in a lump of metals. When my teacher showed me those lights, they reminded me of something: the reaction that occurs when you throw certain substances into a fire.”

“That’s right. When you burn metal, the color of the flame changes based on the type. Blue and green flames do resemble an aurora...”

Rishe nodded at Michel’s somewhat dazed words. For her fireworks, she’d used metal shavings a craftsman from Coyolles had given her. The dust was just a byproduct, so Kyle had sourced it easily.

“Seeing the aurora taught me how to tell different metals apart. And that’s not all.” She drew in a short breath. “It changed the way I looked at things, and it gave me a way to change the color of flames.”

Michel’s eyes widened.

“Are the small lights you see in the darkness wartime torches, or are they fireflies? By changing your perspective, a phenomenon takes on new meaning.” Rishe had realized that the night she’d talked with Arnold on his balcony. What should she do to stop Michel? How could she get Arnold to accept Coyolles? Her answer was to show them the view from different angles—show them the value of the things they considered worthless.

“A single phenomenon can be interpreted in many different ways.” She had finally reached a conclusion she was satisfied with. “Don’t you think people and inventions are the same?”

All along, Michel believed his purpose in life was to bring misery to others. He’d denied Rishe’s assertion that he could exist without a goal, but that was only natural. *He’s an alchemist, after all.* Without proof, words were just predictions. A genius scientist like Michel would never believe someone else’s hypothesis without anything to support it. *If I don’t prove it to him with quantifiable evidence, nothing I say will get through to him!*

So, she offered her proof. “People and inventions do not produce one single effect. Something that exists only to bring unhappiness is an impossibility.”

“You put all this together just to prove a point? Why would you go so far?”

The answer to his question was obvious: “Because I’m your student.”

Michel couldn’t know what Rishe really meant when she said that. Still, her words were like a prayer. In a past life, Michel had spared no effort to teach Rishe everything she could possibly want to know.

Even if he doesn’t know that...even if the world gets reset...that won’t go away. As long as Rishe still remembered it, the truth existed within her, nestled deep in her heart.

“You insist your existence and the things you create can only cause despair...”

A third flash of flame burned in a distant corner of the capital. Even Michel couldn’t rig the devices to go off all at once. The third shot went off late, sailing into the sky with a tail of light behind it.

“So I’ll do everything I can to prove you’re wrong!” For a split second, before the fireworks were set to explode, their lights winked out. “See it with your own eyes. Watch as something that you brought into this world holds a value you never dreamed it could!”

There was a heavy boom, and a huge flower bloomed in the night sky, its petals falling like shooting stars. Lights glittering blue and green spilled forth, mimicking a night sky. They dyed one section of the sky in colors as brilliant as the aurora, crackling as they floated down.

Michel looked up at the lights, squinting against the glare. “I didn’t know...” he said softly. “I knew about flame tests and how gunpowder functioned, but this never occurred to me.”



“I’m sure there are plenty of other applications. If you just change your perspective, every poisonous thing you’ve invented could be put to other uses.”

“Heh heh. You might be right.” Michel’s smile was forlorn. “You’re amazing, Rishe.”

“No, Professor.” She shook her head. “*You’re* amazing. You’re an unparalleled genius, an alchemist who will go on to gift wonders to the world.”

“You really say the strangest things,” Michel said, shaking his head. He looked up at the sky again. “I see... I can hardly believe it.” His expression was fragile, like he might start to cry at any moment. “To think I created the base for something so beautiful.”

She took a step toward him. “Professor, I—”

“What’s going on here, Lawvine?”

Rishe spun around. The air crackled with tension, the knights all taking a knee at once. At the entrance to the garden was someone she wasn’t expecting.

Prince Arnold?!

A dozen imperial knights flanked him. Among them was Rishe’s guard, the one who had run off after the first fireworks went off. He must have been reporting to Arnold.

“Michel!” Kyle ran over. He had been escorted here with the rest of them.

Arnold didn’t spare Rishe a glance, his cold gaze focusing on his vassal. “I believe I asked what’s going on here.”

“I apologize, Your Highness.” Lawvine dipped his head even lower at the weight in Arnold’s voice. “This man made a threat, so we were keeping him under surveillance. I apologize for the delayed report.”

Arnold’s blue eyes slowly settled on Michel. Rishe stiffened. The expression on his face made it clear he understood the broad strokes, if not the fine details.

“What do we do, Sister?” Theodore whispered. “Did the imperial knights escort Kyle here? Do you think Brother captured him, since he’s Michel Hévin’s superior?”

Meanwhile, Lawvine’s report to Arnold continued. “Michel Hévin

announced his intention to cause a violent incident at the eighteenth hour in town. As the capital city is land under the emperor's protection, I kept watch over him as His Majesty's faithful servant."

"I see. I understand your perspective."

Rishe steeled herself. *It's okay. I was prepared to negotiate with Prince Arnold. I still have space to argue for the alliance with Coyolles, and now Michel is dealt with!* She opened her mouth to speak to Arnold.

"However..." For the first time since he'd arrived, Arnold looked at Rishe. "My fiancée announced she planned on correcting Michel Hévin's misunderstanding, did she not?"

Rishe's eyes widened as everyone focused on her.

"It's just as she said. Those phenomena were just a display of Coyolles's engineering prowess."

What's going on?! I mean, maybe the guard told him what I said, but...

She couldn't believe her ears. Arnold was going along with her plan.

Lawvine's brow furrowed. "What exactly are you trying to say, Your Highness?"

"To insult our guests from Coyolles would be grave indeed. Pull back your knights while Prince Kyle is present."

"Can I ask one question, Your Highness? Why is a scholar from Coyolles displaying his engineering prowess in our country?"

Arnold lowered his eyes at Lawvine's question. Rishe's heart pounded. *Is he really going to say it?*

Then Arnold spoke the very words Rishe was hoping for, clear but indifferent: "Our country is forming a technological partnership with Coyolles."

Surprise and joy welled up within Rishe until she thought she would burst. She looked at Kyle, who returned her gaze with a triumphant nod. They'd come to an agreement while she was gone, then.

He understood. Her heart throbbed in her chest. He gets that military might isn't everything. That the techniques Coyolles possesses are incredible. That they might lead to truly amazing inventions one day. And

more than anything else, that Galkhein can foster relationships with other countries rather than invading them!

This was only the first step, but Rishe was still ecstatic as she turned to Arnold. The prince narrowed his blue eyes very slightly in acknowledgment before staring at Lawvine where he knelt.

“In exchange for military support, Coyolles will share its academic know-how with us. To start with, I will send the imperial knights here with me now to Coyolles. The fireworks that graced our skies are proof of the heretofore unknown engineering techniques Coyolles possesses.” Arnold’s voice was level, but the threat in it was plain. “Do you understand? We are forming a new relationship. You cannot interfere by disrespecting our allies.”

“But, Your Highness—”

“I have nothing more to say. Withdraw immediately.” Arnold cut him off, his eyes narrowing. “If this escalates, I can’t promise my father won’t hear of it.”

That shocked Rishe, but she didn’t let it show on her face.

Lawvine remained silent for a moment. Then he turned to Kyle and bowed deeply, still kneeling. “Your Highness Prince Kyle, I apologize for my rudeness. I acted imprudently and take full responsibility for my lapse in judgment. If it will persuade you to forgive me, I offer you my head in apology.”

“Your words are more than enough, sir. Please rise. I also owe you an apology. Your reaction is understandable in light of Michel’s behavior.” Kyle spoke from the heart. He likely hadn’t heard the same report that Arnold had; he just thought Michel was doing experiments where he shouldn’t, being a nuisance like always.

“We will take our leave before we disgrace ourselves any further. Your Highnesses, I once again apologize for my men’s behavior, and for mine.” After bowing once more, Lawvine quietly stood and glanced at Rishe. He gave her a polite bow as well, which Rishe returned with a curtsy.

Theodore slid up to her. “Looks like things have calmed down. I’m going to go take a look around town.” He left the garden before Rishe could even thank him. As if she ever *could* thank him enough for his help. She’d have to think of a way to repay him.

The imperial knights swarming the area also took their leave, dismissed by Arnold. That left Rishe, Arnold, Michel, and Kyle together in the garden.

“Now, Michel.” Kyle cleared his throat, scolding Michel like he was a child. “What do you think you’re doing?! Those fire flowers blooming in the sky! I was shocked. Was that some new invention of yours?!”

“Kyle...”

Nostalgia washed over Rishe. The only unusual aspect was Michel’s brows, which were furrowed in a repentant frown.

“I’m glad you wanted to help the alliance, but you need to tell me before you do these kinds of things. We could have taught Galkhein about this with less public upset, couldn’t we?”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Kyle. I should be repenting for this with my life—”

“Professor Michel.” Rishe called his name, and Michel gave her a troubled look. It wouldn’t do for him to confess everything to Kyle right now. If Kyle learned the truth, as prince of Coyolles, he would feel obligated to take responsibility for the incident. “Just let Prince Kyle scold you for now.”

When she smiled at him, Michel’s eyebrows drooped further. He looked lost at sea. At last, he murmured, “I’m sorry, Kyle. Sorry, Rishe.”

“Michel...?”

“I won’t do it again. I realize now that the premise of my theory was flawed.” Michel squeezed the hem of his lab coat in his hands. “I promise...I won’t do it again.” His words were pure and sincere, like those of a child making a solemn oath.

His attitude stunned Kyle, but Rishe was relieved. She looked up at Arnold again, and their eyes met.

“I want it clear that I’m not doing this out of the kindness of my heart,” Arnold said coldly. “If what that knight reported to me is true, it’s obvious he was planning something rotten. But if I publicly treat him like a criminal, my father will hear about it. I avoided this by using the scheme you are no doubt behind.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

Arnold had even realized that Rishe was behind the fireworks. She doubted the knight had given him a very detailed report, but the excuse Arnold gave Lawvine—that Coyolles was displaying its advanced technology—was the exact story Rishe had been ready to feed Arnold herself. If they could get everything settled, she planned to come clean to him.

“I’ll explain Michel’s original plan later, Your Highness.” It was just an attempted crime, but if he had succeeded, the results would have been grave. They were concealing the truth, but they couldn’t act like he was innocent. “Then you can decide what to do with him.”

“Hah. That’s generous of you.” Arnold laughed impishly. “And you were trying so hard to keep him away from me. You even got Theodore involved.”

He noticed! But of course. Michel’s tails were Theodore’s subordinates stationed around the palace, posing as servants and gardeners. Theodore had originally used them to gather information on Arnold himself, so it was only natural he’d be sensitive to their presence. *I suppose that means Arnold always knew his brother was gathering information on him. He let him do it this whole time... He really is rather soft on him.*

She decided to tell Theodore about this as well. He’d helped her out a lot lately. She’d thank him in any way she could.

“Honestly, I’m as guilty as Michel is. Instead of stopping his plan, I took it over to teach him a lesson...and you too. I wanted *you* to see those fireworks.”

She’d known the timing for each device would be slightly off, and that when Arnold heard the first detonation, he would look up at the sky. That aspect of her plot had gone swimmingly.

“Fireworks contain dangerous substances, but as you saw, they can create scenery unlike anything you’ve ever seen. I hoped that once you witnessed it, you might use that knowledge in exciting new ways.”

She wasn’t limiting gunpowder to one peaceful use either. There were so many possibilities for Coyolles’s manufacturing techniques—particularly in Arnold’s future.

“You believe you only possess abilities specialized for war, but...” She wasn’t concealing gunpowder from him—she was choosing to trust him with the knowledge instead. That was Rishe’s decision. “I know

that someday, I'll prove to you that isn't true," she declared, confident.

Arnold frowned. After a brief silence, he said, "You may regret that, you know. I can do whatever I want with Michel Hévin as long as I'm not public with it."

Rishe pursed her lips at Arnold's characteristic antagonism.

"All I'm saying is, don't get angry with me if I kill and dispose of him in secret. Is that still fine with you?"

"Prince Arnold." She tugged on his sleeve, and Arnold bent down obligingly. They had about twenty centimeters' difference in their heights.

"What is it?"

Rishe stretched up as tall as she could and whispered into his ear, "Believe it or not, the man standing right in front of you is the inventor of the pocket watch." She couldn't see Arnold's face, but she knew he'd be frowning. "He created it to keep track of time during his experiments, or so I hear."

"..."

"He doesn't like attention, so it isn't public knowledge, but there's plenty of proof that he created it in Coyolles. For instance, craftsmen from Coyolles have molds for the device's components."

"..."

"I believe Michel's knowledge will be indispensable when it comes to joint research between Galkhein and Coyolles."

Rishe let her heels settle back on the ground, then tilted her head. "What do you say to that?"

"...I can't believe you." Brow scrunched, Arnold heaved a little sigh. "From the very beginning, you always planned on talking me into this, didn't you?"

"Of course not! I just knew you would be interested in Michel if I told you who he was." That was the truth. She would never be so bold as to think she could manipulate Arnold. Judging by the awkward scowl on his face, though, her plan had paid off.

That was a real gamble. There's no way he planned to send his imperial knights to Coyolles before our meeting this evening. If they were mustered beforehand, I don't think it was for our alliance. He probably

meant to wage war. That sent a shiver down her spine.

I'm curious, though. Earlier, Lawvine had claimed he couldn't obey Theodore's orders because of the emperor. He disobeyed the prince by citing his allegiance to Theodore's more powerful father. *Yet Prince Arnold merely threatened to tell his father about this incident. No one's actually reported it to him yet.*

If she recalled correctly, Lawvine only stated his allegiance, not that he was under orders at present. *Strange. You'd think if a guest of the royal family caused so much trouble, the emperor would hear about it. Especially since Lord Lawvine is so famed for his loyalty.*

Rishe felt deeply unsettled. She knew the future, after all. *The count will attempt to counsel Prince Arnold, and he'll be executed for treason.*

She looked up at Arnold. It was impossible to read any emotions on his countenance. His face was beautiful, but in the way that a sculpture was beautiful.

"What's wrong?"

She gave a slow shake of her head. "Nothing. I'm sure the people in town saw those fireworks too."

Glancing at Michel, she saw that Kyle was still scolding him. He got scary when he was angry, Rishe knew, but she left Michel to deal with it on his own.

"When people learn that it was Coyolles's technology that made that display possible, I believe there will be public support for the alliance."

No one knew what gunpowder was, and it was unlikely they would glean its purpose and power from seeing the fireworks. She hoped the display would remain in people's memories only as a beautiful work of art—a stepping stone to an equal relationship between the powerful nation of Galkhein and the small country of Coyolles.

"You're...probably right."

"Heh heh!" She was pleased that Arnold agreed with her.

Rishe was still ignorant of many things, but she now knew exactly what she had to do. With a deep breath, she renewed her determination, moving forward toward the future.

Epilogue

“**T**HE CAPITAL really is amazing! Did you see that stuff up in the sky?!” Sven’s voice resounded through the training grounds early that morning. “I could see them pretty clearly from my inn. I bet you wish you’d seen ’em too, Lucius.”

“Yeah, I wish I had. I was just so busy, I didn’t really have time to look.”

“Heh heh. You really missed out. And you should thank me, Fritz! You only got to enjoy the view ’cause I invited you over to study!”

Rishe, in her cadet disguise, listened to Sven’s excited rambling with a big smile on her face. Today was the last day of the knight cadets’ special training. As such, this was also the last day of their early morning sessions, and they took extra care with their cleaning. The skies were clear with the promise of a hot day. A wonderful morning all around, yet once again Fritz was looking down.

“Fritz thought they were shooting stars at first. He started making wishes on ’em. Isn’t that right, Fritz?”

“Hmm... Huh?! Oh, yeah!” Fritz looked up, flustered. He really was out of it.

Sven seemed to sense something off and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Lucius, Fritz—gimme your swords. I’ll put ’em away for you.”

“Huh? You don’t have to do that, Sven. We’ll do it together.”

“It’s fine! But you owe me!”

Fritz stared at Sven, eyes wide, before bowing his head and thanking him quietly. Sven left Rishe alone with Fritz in the early morning training grounds. She watched him go and then turned to Fritz. “He sure sounded excited.”

“Ah...yeah, I guess so.” Fritz was still hanging his head. He seemed nervous. “Lu, Count Lawvine summoned us yesterday.”

Rishe could easily imagine what that meant. “You’re going to be knights, then?!”

“Yep. We’ll head back to our hometowns first to prepare before we’re due back in the capital. After that, we’ll be official knights-in-training of Galkhein.”

“Congratulations, Fritz!” Rishe was as delighted to hear it as if it were her own good news. The cadets all showed promise, but Fritz and Sven were particularly talented. “I knew for sure you’d be chosen, but I’m happy to hear it all the same. Have you written to your family yet? Of course, it’d be great to tell them in person too! Really, congra—”

“I ran into Lord Lawvine on my way here today.” Rishe blinked in surprise. Fritz’s words came out compressed, like squeezing them out was painful. “He told me, ‘Lucius Alcott won’t be joining the knights.’ It was your own decision, he said.”

Lawvine hadn’t revealed Rishe’s secret. After the incident with Michel the night before, Rishe wrote him a message. She apologized for lying about her identity and disturbing his vital training sessions. No doubt he was incredibly busy, but she received a response immediately. She would see him tonight at a party to see off the guests from Coyolles. His message had also said this: “If your time allows it, please continue to attend training as a candidate until the final day.”

I’m not sure how much I can trust Lord Lawvine after the incident last night, but...he’s trying to protect “Lucius Alcott’s” life as a knight candidate.

Rishe apologized to her dear friend. “I’m sorry, Fritz.” She looked him square in the eye. “The truth is that I’ve been telling a really big lie this whole time.”

“A lie...?”

“That lie permitted me to come here and train with you all, but it was still a lie. I can’t become a knight right now.” Her sixth life—when she’d chosen that path—and this one, her seventh, were worlds apart. “I was even lying to you... I really am sorry.”

Fritz’s eyes swam. “I’m sorry too, Lu.”

“Why? What do you have to be sorry for, Fritz?”

Fritz hesitated, but eventually he made up his mind and, still looking down, shouted, “I think I’ve known for a while now what you were lying about!”

“Huh?!” Rishe’s eyes opened wide.

“I always thought it was strange! I mean, you’re so small, and you

seem really delicate, and your voice is high! So, um...!"

No way! He realized I'm a girl?!

As Rishe started to panic, Fritz voiced his conclusion, his face grave. "You're really, like, fourteen, aren't you?!"

Rishe froze. "What?"

"Yeah, you can only attend this training if you're fifteen or older. But I'm guessing you came here for your family, lying about your real age, right?"

"Er, well. Actually, you see—"

"No, it's fine! If it gets out that you were lying, I know you'll be disqualified for the test next year! And you don't need to tell me if I'm right!" Fritz babbled. Apparently, he *hadn't* caught on.

Right. Even in my life as a knight, only the captain realized I was a woman! Rishe felt a complicated blend of relief and guilt at knowing she was still undiscovered. To be fair, last night, Arnold had said, "There's nothing you can do about Lawvine finding out, but make sure none of the other knight cadets realize you're a girl."

"I'm sorry, Fritz. I promise I'll tell you the truth one day..."

"You don't need to! Don't worry about it!" When Rishe looked up, Fritz had a sunny smile on his face. "You said 'one day,' though. That means you're planning on seeing me again after training ends today, right?"

At that, Rishe suddenly realized the reason for Fritz's bad mood these last couple of days: He was dreading their parting. They had only been together for ten short days, and Rishe hadn't even been telling him the truth, but Fritz had put everything he had into their friendship. Rishe was so happy that she couldn't stop herself from beaming.

"Of course. Things might be a little different between us, but I definitely will!"

"I'll be stronger then, I promise."

Rishe squeezed Fritz's proffered hand. "Then let's both try as hard as we can, Fritz."

For a split second, Fritz looked like he might cry, but Rishe thought she'd imagined it. An instant later, he was back to that same radiant smile as always.

May you boys never end up on a tragic battlefield.

Rishe sensed someone's presence and glanced at the entrance of the training grounds. Lawvine, count of Galkhein's northern border, strolled inside. He looked at Rishe, dipping his head in a bow only she would notice. Rishe returned the gesture, and then they were once again instructor and trainee. No matter the circumstances between them, they still had to finish this last day.

At three in the afternoon, after finishing various errands, Rishe walked down the hall in the detached palace. Running into Oliver on the way, she asked where she could find Arnold. Learning he was in his office, she bid goodbye to Oliver, who was headed for the palace proper.

Rishe made her way to the office and knocked on the door. She waited for permission and entered the room to find Arnold surveying her with surprise.

"That was fast."

"It was more than enough time. Thank you, truly."

With his eyes, Arnold directed her to sit. Rishe slid into a chair on the right side of the office. Arnold watched her, then looked down at his hands again. He picked up his pen and asked, "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes. I made things very clear with the professor."

After her morning training, Rishe had visited Michel. Everyone from Coyolles would be leaving first thing in the morning. This was their last full day in Galkhein, and Kyle was busy saying his goodbyes. For the mess he'd made, Michel had been confined to his quarters, but Arnold had a word with Kyle and Rishe had been admitted entry.

"If only you could take my head off and scoop out my knowledge." The first thing out of Michel's mouth had been that frankly terrifying comment. Even Rishe, who was used to his antics, was taken aback.

Rishe added honey to his tea, admonishing, "There's no way to do

that, and there wouldn't be any point. 'Epiphanies come not from existing knowledge but from new experiences,' right?"

"You really know what you're talking about. I think you're a little too open-minded, though." Taking the too-sweet tea, Michel looked at the floor. "I could make a bunch of chemicals for war, but I just don't think taking charge of Coyolles and Galkhein's joint research to make positive impact in the world is the right fit for me."

"Professor."

The night before, with Michel's permission, Rishe had told Arnold the truth about everything—about gunpowder and how Michel had wanted to use it, and that Michel likely felt he needed to repent for what he'd done. But Arnold had just said, "*Michel Hévin's role will remain the same,*" with the usual uninterested expression on his face.

Michel, the one who had caused the commotion in the first place, didn't seem to agree. Rishe understood his feelings and tried to persuade him. "You might not be satisfied, but any normal person would find this a particularly grueling task. I mean, there's royalty from two countries involved, and you'll need to constantly produce viable results. In your position, a normal person would crumble under the pressure."

"Hmm, you may be right. In that case, I suppose I do need to do what I can." His wording had been somewhat vapid but remarkable nonetheless. In all her time as an alchemist, Rishe had never seen Michel pledge himself to something. "I'm not used to this, but I'll do my best. I've never done research with the goal of improving the world."

"I'm really looking forward to seeing what your new state of mind allows you to come up with," Rishe said, dead serious, and Michel giggled in amusement. But he looked happy too. It was Rishe's first time seeing him laugh that way.

Michel tucked his hair behind his ear and cast his eyes down again, muttering, "I wanted to apologize for what I said to you the other day. When I said you weren't suited to being an empress."

Rishe had forgotten about that completely. "I don't think you were wrong."

"No, I think you really are suited for it. But I still think it's too bad." His violet eyes softened. "You don't regret spending your life as Arnold Hein's bride?"

“I don’t, Professor,” Rishe said plainly. Come to think of it, she hadn’t been able to finish what she wanted to say to him the other day. She smiled and told him, “Right now, what I want to study most is the man who will be my husband.” More than any scientific research or theory, she felt this from the bottom of her heart. “That is why I’ll remain here. Even if he breaks off our engagement and chases me away.”

“I have no right to stop you, then.”

Glad that he understood, Rishe stood and bowed to him. “I’m sorry for taking so much of your time. I know you have to prepare for your return home.”

“No, I was happy to talk to you. I suppose we won’t see each other for a while.” Michel stood and, with that same gentle smile, said, “See you later, my student.”

His goodbye reminded her of the final words they’d exchanged in her life as an alchemist, but unlike those said that moonless night, these promised another meeting.

“It’s all thanks to you, Prince Arnold.”

“I didn’t do anything significant,” Arnold said at his work desk, visibly disinterested.

“But you did. You made a very generous decision.”

“It’s just more productive to put him to use rather than bluster on about what wasn’t anything more than an attempt. Oh, and I received a report on the man’s behavior. Michel Hévin may be a capable scholar, but I don’t want anything to do with him personally. I’ll leave our joint research with Coyolles in his hands. I’ll take the benefits, but I’m not managing him myself.”

“I still think it’s generous of you.”

“I don’t care. Plus, you’ll be looking in on him from time to time to make sure he’s not working on anything nefarious, right?”

Rishe gave him a firm nod. “Right. I’ll take care of it!”

It was the first time Arnold had ever entrusted her with something, and she found the idea exciting. “I’m looking forward to it. I can’t wait to see what the joint powers of Prince Arnold, Prince Kyle,

and Professor Michel can invent.”

“And then we’ll see how long it’ll take to create those carriages that move without horses you talked about.”

“Heh heh.”

Back in the garden, he barely seemed to be paying attention, but this showed he *had* been thinking about it. That made Rishe strangely happy. Constantly agonizing over the future was tiring her out, but if she had Arnold and other people working alongside her, the possibilities seemed endless.

Working toward a better future sounds preferable to trying to avoid the worst ones! I still don’t know what Arnold’s plans are, but I feel like I’m making progress.

All she could do was keep changing things one by one until a new future was born. Her days training as a knight candidate had ended safely. Her next plan: start her final preparations for their marriage ceremony.

Next up is the church, so I should—

While she was making plans in her head, Arnold put his pen down and studied her. “I see you’ve got your scheming face on again.”

“Heavens, no! Perish the thought!” Rishe donned a smile and veered the conversation off-topic. “Oh, I have one more thing to report about Coyolles’s technology, Prince Arnold!” Giddy, she pulled a small velvet box out of her bag.

Arnold could guess what was inside. “It’s finished, then.”

“It is.”

Inside the box was the ring Arnold had bought for her. A craftsman from Coyolles had presented it to Rishe this very afternoon. Rishe hadn’t seen it yet either—it was still inside the box. She figured if she was opening a present, she should do it in front of the one who gave it to her.

“I promised to show it to you as soon as it was complete, didn’t I?”

Arnold didn’t respond.

“I peeked at the design a little while ago, and it was gorgeous. I’m sure the finished product is—”

Before she could excitedly open the box, Arnold called her name as if to stop her. “Rishe.”

She looked up and found him staring straight at her. With the same blank look he’d worn earlier, he quietly said, “You don’t need to put it on and show me.”

Rishe’s heart thrummed in her chest. She suddenly found she couldn’t look Arnold in the face. She hung her head, trying to hide the no-doubt pathetic look she was wearing.

What is this feeling? She found herself squeezing the ring box on her lap, confused by the welling emotions. Why was she suddenly overcome with sorrow and loneliness?

“By that, you mean...?” was all she managed to say, trying to mask the hoarseness in her voice. Why did she feel so miserable? Normally, she was perfectly happy to appreciate the things she liked on her own without letting anyone else’s opinion bother her.

“I believe I told you the only thing I wanted to do was buy you the ring.”

Even after that, she still couldn’t muster the courage to look at him. Her heart hurt so much she feared she might never be able to look at him again. And a crown princess who couldn’t even stand the sight of her husband had more to worry about than whether she was suited for the position.

What do I do?

While her thoughts spiraled, Arnold spoke up again. “I have no right to ask for anything more.”

“Huh?” Rishe’s head snapped up. Well, there was that worry gone. She was looking at him fine.

When their eyes met, Arnold abandoned his pen and leaned back in his chair. “You should wear what you like. I’m not going to force you to wear anything just because I gave it to you.”

“Oh, Prince Arnold...”

“That goes for the wedding as well. Wear whatever you want without worrying what anyone else will think.”

When she heard that, she finally understood what Arnold was trying to do: respect her wishes. Normally, a crown princess wouldn’t be

given anywhere near this level of freedom. She was only a duke's daughter, but Rishe had been taught from a young age that some things had to be prioritized over her own desires. Even now, she couldn't stop herself from thinking that way sometimes. It had happened back in the jewelry store, when she'd considered their wedding and her position as the crown princess over her own preferences.

But Prince Arnold is saying that he respects my wishes. That I need not force myself to wear this ring, even if he bought it for me. Arnold was always like this. Whether it was dressing like a man or studying alchemy, he allowed her to do as she liked. *He's not just indifferent or thoughtless. He's actively supporting my desire for freedom.*

The thought should have made her happy. *I should be glad. I know it's asking too much to want more, but...*

Rishe found herself muttering sulkily, "No..."

"What?"

Even *she* thought she sounded immature. Arnold was surprised—he hadn't expected her to react like that. Shocking him was rare, so she revealed the truth, despite her desire to keep it a secret. "Do you remember how I chose the ring finger on my left hand when they measured me?"

"Yeah. I asked you why, but you didn't tell me."

"In my country, when a couple is married, the husband presents the wife with a ring. It's a tradition that began with the first king and queen. The ring is always worn on the left ring finger." That was why Rishe had chosen that finger. When she told him, Arnold frowned for some reason. "Even someone like me respects that tradition."

She'd probably just said something she shouldn't have, but she couldn't stop herself all the same. Driven by some obstinate feeling, Rishe stood, holding the ring box. "I want to wear this ring for the ceremony, and I'll choose a dress that matches it! You say I don't need to, but I plan to wear it all the time!"

"Rishe, calm down."

"I-In fact, I wanted to put it on right away, but I held myself back and came here first!" She stomped over until she was right in front of Arnold's desk. He swallowed nervously. "So...please put it on my finger right now, Prince Arnold." She set the box down in front of him and

thrust out her left hand.

Arnold knit his brows and said, "I'm not wearing gloves right now."

"Ugh..." When she'd first met him in this life, she'd made Arnold swear not to lay a finger on her, and he'd been diligently upholding that promise, wearing gloves to parties and other such places. Right now, however, his hands were bare. She could see the flex of tendons under his skin that gloves would normally hide.

"You don't need them." Telling him that was embarrassing, but it was easier than saying, *Go ahead and touch me skin to skin.*

Arnold desired very little from Rishe. After all, they'd had a contest where she'd promised to do anything he wanted if he won. He *had* won, and all he wanted was to buy her a ring. Rishe wanted to wear that ring. And she wanted Arnold to see her wearing it.

"I want to put it on right now." Arnold was way too good at making Rishe act selfishly. She took a deep breath, building courage. "Please, Your Highness."

Arnold sighed and looked down. He picked up the box and stood, walking around the desk. But when he reached Rishe, he took her wrist and led her over to the couch, directing her to sit. Rishe sat and blinked up at him, lashes fluttering. Arnold knelt before her, taking her left hand into his large one. Just that contact made her cheeks flare with heat. And to make matters worse, Arnold brought her hand up to his lips, his eyes cast down, and kissed the base of her ring finger.

"Rishe." He called her name with his lips still touching her.



“Mmh...” Rishe’s free hand flew up to cover her mouth. Arnold raised his head, but then he intertwined his fingers with hers.

Wh-what is this?! Her head spun. She was realizing for the first time now that she didn’t just like Arnold’s eye color. She was also very fond of the shape of his hands and fingers. But this was no time for such thoughts.

Arnold was absolutely toying with her, but the look on his face was as cool as ever. He managed to seem sincere as he asked, voice slightly husky, “Is it all right if I touch you?”

It’s a little late, isn’t it?! It was like he was only asking to hear her answer. “Y-yes...” She nodded as best as she could.

Arnold’s eyes narrowed in satisfaction. He opened the ring box with one hand, keeping his other hand on Rishe’s. His big hands were dexterous, and he was easily able to get the ring out one-handed.

Meanwhile, Rishe was reaching her limit. *What was that kiss?*

She had heard that kneeling and kissing the back of a woman’s hand was the marriage proposal custom among the nobility in Galkhein, but when Arnold had proposed to her, he’d only knelt and taken her hand. Maybe this was a do-over of that night.

Is it because I told him I respected marriage traditions? If that was the case, then his earlier question essentially amounted to a second proposal.

Ack, why is my face so hot?! Rishe knew she was overthinking this, but she squeezed her eyes shut nonetheless. Arnold’s fingers were on her wrist now, perhaps to make it easier for him to put the ring on her. The moment they touched her, Rishe’s heart pounded even harder, obliterating her composure.

Our hands are just touching! This was nothing more intimate than a simple handshake, yet the contact almost made Rishe panic. *I shouldn’t have told him not to lay a finger on me when all this started.* She regretted it so much it made her want to cry. She had never imagined simply taking back that request would be so mortifying.

While she was trembling, her lips pressed shut, Arnold gave her an exasperated look and said, “Hey, don’t hold your breath.”

“I-I’m not.” That was a lie, she *was* holding her breath. She didn’t like keeping things from him, but the truth was too painful. “It’s just

that I can't really remember how breathing works..."

"Heh."

He laughed! How dare he, after making her so flustered. This wasn't the first time it had happened, but she didn't have the energy to complain.

Rishe flinched as the cold ring touched her finger, contrasting with the heat of her body, embarrassing her further. She wondered if Arnold remembered the temperature her hand normally was. *Please don't notice that it's hotter than usual!*

Arnold slid the ring on, his touch almost reverent. It felt like it took forever, maybe because Rishe had her eyes closed, but eventually the ring settled right in the spot where Arnold had kissed her.

"Pwah..." Rishe exhaled the breath she'd been holding, her eyes still closed.

"Did you remember how to breathe?"

"S-somehow..."

"Seems you've forgotten how to open your eyes now," he said, amused.

That made opening her eyes even harder. Her heart rang like an alarm bell in her chest, and she had no idea what to do with her face. She hung her head to hide it instead and felt Arnold's hands reaching out to her.

"Mmh..." Rishe's shoulders flinched when he touched her closed eyelid. His thumb brushed against her lashes, tracing the line they drew, like he was wiping away tears. Or maybe waking a small child who was deeply asleep. His finger touched her delicately, making its way to the corner of her eye.

"Rishe."

Even his voice was soft and soothing, and Rishe was finally able—albeit timidly—to open her eyes. When she did, she saw Arnold looking at her bright-red face like it was something precious, his eyes narrowed in fondness.

"I'm done."

His hands slowly withdrew, and for some reason Rishe was sad to let them go. He gestured for her to look down and she did, blurting out,

“Wow...”

Shining on her finger was a ring set with a blue sapphire. The band shone brilliantly, like it was spun out of golden thread, with two strands curving together like waves. It was a showy piece, but it had a refined beauty. To think of the sheer delicacy needed to craft such a design. The center stone was inlaid with small, starlike diamonds. They twinkled like protective lights, shining heroically and adorably.

It's beautiful and...kind of cute? Most of all... Set in the center was a brilliant, eye-catching sapphire—a deep, endless blue, like a frozen lake in a cold northern country. Holding her hand up, Rishe let the sunlight glance off it, murmuring, “It really is the same color as your eyes, Your Highness...”

A peculiar joy blossomed inside her. The old woman who ran the store had smiled and told her that jewelry was like a good luck charm. Rishe savored her happiness, finally understanding what she meant.

“I feel like I can do anything wearing this ring.” A moment later, she gasped. Arnold himself hated the color of his eyes. What would he think when he saw a ring she'd chosen to match them?

“What do you think, Your Highness?” Rishe furrowed her brows, timidly laying her hands on her lap. If she raised them now, Arnold would be able to see the ring on it up close. She did so, and his eyes fell upon it.

“Well...” His voice was stripped of defenses. He took Rishe's hand again, entwining their fingers once more and brushing his thumb over the shape of the ring, as if to see how it felt. It tickled, sending a strange tingling through Rishe. She hunched her shoulders, but she didn't pull her hand away.

Arnold looked down and smiled. “It feels better than I thought it would.”

Rishe's breath caught. *I also...* Rishe shut her lips tight to keep the surfacing thought from escaping her mouth. *I also feel happy for some reason when I see you smiling like that...* She also felt a little like crying, she realized belatedly.

“What is it, Rishe?”

She couldn't bring herself to say exactly what she was feeling. She shook her head softly and, somewhat at a loss, said, “I find myself

wanting to pester you for something else, Prince Arnold.”

“Tell me.” His tone seemed to imply that anything she desired she would have, and Rishe found her heart throbbing again. “Right now, I’ll listen. Whatever it is.”

Hearing his whisper with his eyes on her made her earlier agitation flare up. Arnold usually did anything she asked of him, so long as it wasn’t related to national politics. All in all, she was frightfully spoiled, but that ship had sailed.

Rishe spoke her wish, forcing the tremble out of her voice. “I’d like to go on a journey with you, Your Highness. I’d be a great tour guide, you know.”

“A journey?”

“Yes. A journey to see all the beautiful things in the world.” It didn’t have to be right now, but Rishe wanted a promise for the future. “Not just fireflies and fireworks... I want to show you all kinds of things worth seeing.”

Arnold’s eyes narrowed, like he was squinting against the light. The color was even clearer in the sunlight pouring in through the office’s windows. For the thousandth time, Rishe was captivated by those eyes.

“...There’s one more of those now because of you.”

“Huh?” Rishe wasn’t expecting that. She blinked in surprise. “What’s that?”

“Who knows. If you can’t figure it out yourself, I’m not going to explain it.”

“Th-that’s not fair!” She wanted to demand an answer, but Arnold just pulled his fingers away and stood up. Rishe pouted in protest. “Do you think normal people can solve your riddles?”

“Rishe, normal people don’t blow up strange chemicals in the skies above their in-laws’ house.”

“Ugh...” That was hardly relevant, but she still didn’t want to hear it. Reluctantly, she relented, and Arnold placed his hand on her head with a bemused smile.

“I don’t think it’s that difficult a puzzle.”

He kept petting her, rendering Rishe speechless. Even when he

was just touching her in jest, it was hard to keep her composure. She wished he would stop.

Rishe hung her head, wondering why she was getting so flustered. Her hands were in her lap, the ring on her finger shining like the ocean.

I hope one day he'll be able to understand just how beautiful I find this color.

For the time being, she'd wear the ring to the party tonight. It would shine radiantly as she saw off Kyle and Michel, lighting the flame for a wonderful future between their two countries.

To be continued...

Bonus Story: Fake Dating for Fleeting Amusement

IN THE MIDDLE of the capital city market was a cake shop with a sterling reputation. Business was booming, but to enter the place, guests had to meet certain conditions. Apparently, the store only accepted business from couples. Rishe had discovered it on her second clandestine outing with Arnold, on their way back from thanking the owner of the jewelry store for her ring.

“That’s what I heard, at least. While we’re waiting in this line, please pretend we’re a couple!”

Beside her, Arnold pressed a hand to his forehead and sighed. “I can’t believe you.”

The line outside the shop was long. This was likely unfamiliar territory for Arnold, but the reason for his sullen look seemed to be because Rishe had proposed *pretending* to be a couple.

“I don’t see why we have to pretend. We’re engaged. Isn’t that good enough?”

“Well, apparently, they don’t just let you in because you’re married. Their selling point is the couples-only atmosphere. If they relaxed the restrictions, their reputation would suffer. I think they’d turn us down if we were just formally engaged.”

In Rishe’s mind, being “a couple” and being “engaged” were two clearly separate things. Arnold seemed to understand and relented at last. Rishe found herself waiting in line prepared to play the role of Arnold’s girlfriend, and just as she expected, she found it difficult to relax.

“I feel like the employee who’s watching the line is giving us the stink eye.”

Unconcerned, Arnold said, “He’s just a regular citizen. You’re paranoid.”

“You can’t underestimate the observational skills of a merchant. They practice every day to spot counterfeit currency and people who will leave while failing to pay.”

“Those seem like pretty specific offenses, but...”

Rishe took in her surroundings with grave caution. *We must be thorough with our act. Maybe imitate what other people are doing.*

Making full use of the senses she'd honed in her life as a knight, Rishe noticed something. After getting over the shock of it, she glanced at Arnold. Steeling her will, she sidled up to him, only for him to look down at her with a grimace.

“What is it now?”

“Look at the people around us.” Rishe pulled Arnold down by the sleeve and whispered to him, “The real couples are standing right next to each other. But we had enough space for a person in between us, right?”

“...”

I've still got the habit from my previous life to maintain the space to draw my sword. And I'm guessing Prince Arnold is the same.

She mimicked the other couples and inched closer, her shoulder nearly brushing Arnold's arm.

“Come to think of it, one *does* look intimate with a gentleman if one snuggles up to him a bit. I learned that a long time ago—that is, during crown princess lessons back in my home country.”

“Oh?” Arnold's voice was lower than usual. Rishe looked up at him, wondering why. Green eyes met his blue. Their glow was slightly darker than usual too. “These would be lessons you took to be some other man's queen?”

“Huh?” Before Rishe could react to the unexpected question, Arnold wrapped his arm around her waist with a huff.

“Fine. If you're so insistent, I'll play along and pretend.”

“Wh-what? Wait, Prince—eep!”

Arnold tugged her closer, and Rishe's breath caught at the sensation of being pressed up against him. He wasn't manhandling her—this was the normal distance for, say, dancing—but it was so unexpected that Rishe was having trouble processing it. And then he whispered in her ear.

“If you're so stiff, that employee with the ‘incredible powers of observation’ will catch on.”

Rishe gasped. He was right—this was ideal, actually. Since Arnold was on board now, they could be more thorough in their act. She squeezed her eyes shut, nodding a few times to disguise how red her face felt. Now that she'd gotten this far, she had no idea what to do. All the information she'd gathered observing the other couples went straight out of her head when Arnold wrapped his arm around her.

"Sh-should I do something too?" She looked up desperately at Arnold for some hint.

The way he was smiling was rather ill intentioned. "Well, what did you learn in your little etiquette class, hmm?"

"I forgot! Whatever I learned, I can't put it into practice! My head's completely blank right now!"

"Pfft." Arnold snickered. Apparently, Rishe's protests were amusing. With a self-satisfied look, he reached out with the arm that wasn't around Rishe's waist and took her left hand.

"Er, does it seem a little noisy around us?"

"Just your imagination," Arnold said nonchalantly, but people were definitely watching them. It was no wonder, really. If a man with such a beautiful face began acting like this in public, he was bound to attract the attention of any nearby ladies. Yet he continued to speak, his tone perfectly sincere. "Your feet don't hurt from walking around town, do they? I don't mind carrying you while we're waiting in line."

"I, um...! I-I-I'm fine! I have plenty of energy left!"

He was taking the role so seriously, it was like he was actually trying to seduce her. Her head was swimming. And then Arnold murmured in her ear *again*.

"At a time like this, it's better to just let me take care of you."

Really?! That was shocking, but she'd only been answering honestly. Maybe it was the wrong thing to say, since they were supposed to be a couple.

Confused, Rishe whispered back to him, "Th-that's too much, though! Carrying me is too much!"

"What do you want to do, then? I'll go along with whatever you decide."

"Way to put me on the spot!"

Using the couples around them for reference was no longer going to work, since everyone in line now had their eyes glued to Rishe and Arnold. *Oh no, are we standing out because we're not couple-y enough?!*

She couldn't let Arnold do all the work. Rishe mustered up the courage and squeezed Arnold's hand back. *Well, how's that?!* She looked up at him, feeling accomplished, and found his eyes slightly wide. Managing to surprise him delighted her.

While she was staring up proudly, Arnold chuckled ever so faintly. *Wow...* The expression on his face was so soft, Rishe felt her heart skip.

"I was surprised at how small your ring felt when I held it the other day, but I suppose it's only natural..." Arnold linked his fingers with hers. A sweet tingling sensation went through Rishe at the skin-to-skin contact. "Your fingers are so delicate. I feel like I'll injure them if I'm not careful."

Rishe's only response was spluttering until Arnold abruptly let go of her hand. "That should about do it."

"Hwha?!"

"The employee went back inside. That should be enough pretending, right?" Arnold's face was completely blank as he removed his hand from her waist.

Finally freed from his arms, Rishe scrambled to correct her posture before her weak knees could send her sinking to the ground. *Am I just too self-conscious?! Maybe I am... I mean, Prince Arnold was just cooperating with me out of the kindness of his heart, right?* But then her eyes met Arnold's, and he smirked.

"What's wrong? You look flustered."

Rishe let out a cross between a groan and a scream. He *was* teasing her. She wanted to protest, but he was helping her. She swallowed her complaints and simply thanked him instead. For some reason, that brought another chuckle out of him.

Coming out of the experience slightly worse for wear, Rishe nevertheless obtained some worthwhile information inside the shop. And so, she was satisfied.

Afterword

TOUKO AMEKAWA HERE. Thank you so much for picking up *7th Time Loop* Volume 2! In this volume, our heroine Rishe plays a bit of offense and defense between some people from her third life and her fiancé Arnold in this life.

Thank you so much for drawing the illustrations once more, Wan☆Hachipisu! I'm crazy about all of it, from the lively world depicted in the cover image to the characters' expressions, faces, and designs. The illustrations are so beautiful and so cute!

Thank you as well to my editor, as always. It's very reassuring to hear "we'll figure something out" in response to my mistakes.

Finally, to those readers who stuck around after the first volume, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart!

At the end of this volume, the hero, Arnold, finally arrived at about a 3 out of 10 on the "expressing emotions" scale to Rishe. Thankfully, we'll be able to continue the story in Volume 3, so I'd love it if you could watch over him and his changes still to come in this and the fantastic manga version by Hinoki Kino-sensei!

I hope to see you in the next volume.



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